

Afrocentricity, Ndebele proverbs, and Deviant youth behaviour in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

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Abstract

Some Zimbabwean elders have referred to Zimbabwean youth as “the lost generation”. This characterization of the youths arises out of the growing concern over some of the young people’s anti-social behaviour in some cities where the youths engage in drug-taking and unprotected group sex. Using the naturalistic and empowerment evaluation research design and Asante’s Afrocentric theoretical framework, in tandem, the main argument of this article is that in order for the youth to mature into adults that will contribute positively towards the advancement of society, they need to be guided and counselled right from infancy. Some Ndebele proverbs such as “Isigogo sigoqwa sisemanzi” (A skin/hide is pliable when it has just been removed from an animal; once it is allowed to dry, it stiffens) encapsulate this process of inculcating moral principles to children while they are still young and pliable. Since this article employs the evaluation research design, it cannot offer quantifiable outcomes. However, the guidance inculcated by the elders is expected to foster improvement and self-determination in the youth. The article recommends collaboration between the elders and the youth which may bring the latter back to the path of civility.

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1.0 Introduction

Traditional Ndebele culture has knowledge systems ingrained in proverbs that elders can use to impart acceptable moral values to deviant youths. For purposes of this paper, “youth” will be defined in the following ways: firstly, as the time when a person is young, especially the time when a child becomes an adult; secondly, as the quality or state of being young, and thirdly, when we refer to “the youth”, we mean “young people” considered as a group.

Some of the most difficult questions to answer are: When does youth begin and end? Who are the youth? It is extremely challenging to come up with a clear answer to these questions, bearing in mind that “different regions, cultures and communities have different conceptions of [youth],” (Ncube, 1998, p. 11).

Whatever definition is used of “youth”, it should be noted that this is a stage in human development which is a product of so many variables. Key among these variables are: religious upbringing; school educational experience and/or teachers; peers or friends; the media (radio, TV, newspapers, films; parents, family, relatives; cultural or ethnic background, including travelling and other aspects such as past experience (Strong, Yarber, Sayad and De Vault, 2008, p. 6).

Each individual becomes the kind of person he or she is as a result of continuing and continuous interaction between a growing, changing biological organism and its physical, psychological and social environment (Conger, 1977, p. 36). One commentator calls this stage of human development a period of “storm and stress” (Coleman, 1980, p. 11).

The other term that must be defined is “sexuality”, which will, for the purposes of this article be understood in the following ways: firstly, the word refers to the feelings and activities connected with a person’s sexual desires, capacity for sexual feelings, and secondly, it refers to a person’s sexual orientation or preference.

Let it be known, right from the start, that according to the current Constitution of Zimbabwe (Amendment No. 20) Act 2013, same-sex relationships are not allowed. Section 78(3) states, quite categorically: “Persons of the same sex are prohibited from marrying each other.”

1.1 Research Design and Methodology

As mentioned in the Abstract, this article adopted a modified form of what Mouton calls the Evaluation Research design (2000, pp. 158 - 161). The aim of this research design is to foster improvement and self-determination on the target group (in this case the youth). Since the transition from youthhood to adulthood stretches over many years, it is neither possible nor desirable to include outcomes or findings in this article. Instead, the focus is on the process of implementation (the use of Ndebele proverbs by elders to inculcate acceptable moral behaviour in the youths). It should be noted that one is permitted to vary the structure of one's article. The reason is that Humanities articles can vary so much that it is very difficult to prescribe a uniform structure, as is the case with Social and Pure Sciences. According to Belcher (2009, p. 180),

humanities articles proceed differently in that discussion occurs continuously, not just at the end of the article. The author presents a piece of evidence (in this case the deviant behaviour of some youths, a phenomenon that is in the public domain) interprets that evidence, suggests how that evidence supports the argument, and repeats this process until satisfied that the argument is convincing.

This is the reason why, in this article, the author is not able to quantify the findings. The author can only speculate on the implications of the study, but a conclusion has been reached and recommendations have been made.

1.2 Research Questions and the Significance of the study

Who are the youth?

How do the youth manifest the deviant behaviour?

When do they engage in this anti-social behaviour?

What form does the deviance by the youth take, and with what consequences?

Why do the young people behave in this way?

What is the role of elders in guiding and counselling the youth?

This article grapples with a real-life problem – deviant behaviour by some young people. Engaging in activities such as gratuitous unprotected sexual intercourse and abusing drugs are not only immoral and criminal but may also end in the extermination of the young people. The article is therefore important in that it offers one more way of tackling a perennial and universal life-threatening problem in modern society.

2.0 Review of Related Literature and Theoretical Framework

Afrocentricity will inform this article. The major exponent of Afrocentricity is Molefi Kete Asante, a seventh generation African-American who was previously known as Arthur Lee Smith Jr. He argues that there is a necessity for African people to view themselves as agents, instead of as objects on the fringes of Europe. Asante is not the only advocate of Afrocentricity, as his stance has long been the rallying cry of scholars such as Achebe, Soyinka, Mudimbe, Makouta-M'Boukou, to mention only four people, that Euro-American hegemony should be supplanted with Afrocentricity, and that “Africa can no longer be treated (and should never have been treated) as a ‘void’ or a ‘blank’” (Miller 1990, p. 4).

Asante strongly believes that the African people must always use African agency in everything that they analyse. Afrocentric behaviour demands that before Africans rush to other cultures for solutions to their problems, they must first exhaust their own fountains of knowledge. African indigenous knowledge systems must be revisited.

Afrocentricity does not imply that Africans must completely isolate and insulate themselves from other cultures. No. Instead, Africans must be selective in their interaction with other cultures; Africans must take the good from other cultures and mix it with the good in African culture. Africans must not simply copy from other cultures.

Asante illustrates the identity issue with “the story of a mother eagle that was flying low over a chicken yard holding her newly born baby in her claws as she joined a large flock of eagles. A gust of wind forced the young eagle out of the mother’s claws and it fell into [a] chicken yard. All she could see when she looked into the yard were chickens. So, after a long and exhaustive search, she reluctantly left the baby eagle and flew away with the large flock of eagles.

As the baby eagle grew in the chicken yard, it began to see itself as a chicken. Surrounded as it was by the chickens, the little eagle received chicken education, wore chicken clothes, ate chicken food, and attempted to imitate the walk and mannerisms of chickens. Every day the little eagle practised its chicken education. Its curriculum was a strictly chicken curriculum, one made expressly for chickens, to assist chickens in living in the chicken yard as good chickens. When the little eagle spoke, it spoke chicken language because it did not know eagle language. It carried its head like the chickens because it had only a faint knowledge, elementary knowledge, of what an eagle style or fashion might have been. All traces of its earlier eagle training had been forgotten. In everything, the little eagle acted like a chicken until one day it started to think of itself as a chicken.

It tried to mimic the chickens. Whatever the chickens did, it did. If the chickens laughed, it laughed. If the chickens said, 'It is a good day,' the eagle said 'it is a good day outside.' In everything that mattered the eagle saw itself as a chicken. It did not recognise itself as an eagle. In fact, all eagle consciousness was lost. Although it questioned why it looked different from the rest of the chickens, it just thought it was a funny-looking chicken. Soon it never thought of itself as anything but a chicken, strange-looking and all. There were physical characteristics it did not like because they were not the characteristics appreciated by the chickens. It never saw itself in the light of its eagle history; it was simply a chicken.

One sunny day an old eagle flew over the chicken yard. It had no special mission and was not looking for anything in particular. However, as it was leisurely flying over the large chicken yard, something caught its attention. It looked down and saw what it thought was an eagle. It flew closer and looked with keener sight and saw what it was sure was an eagle. It then flew to a tree just next to the chicken yard and it called out to the bird that looked like an eagle. 'Come out here and talk with me young eagle,' the old eagle said. The eagle in the chicken yard ignored the old eagle because it knew it was not the eagle that was being called because it was a chicken. But the old eagle persisted and at last the eagle in the chicken yard recognised that he was being called. Whereupon the eagle in the yard turned and said to the old eagle, 'I am not an eagle. I am a chicken.' The old eagle, with knowledge that stretched back through generations of eagles, said, 'I know an eagle when I see one.'

You are an eagle. Open your wings and fly up here and let us talk.’ The young eagle in the chicken yard said, ‘I cannot fly because I am a chicken.’ After the old eagle had asked it several times, the young eagle stretched its wings and flapped them up the tree. It looked down at the chicken yard and said, ‘I did not know that I could do that.’ The old eagle asked the young eagle to fly and they flew effortlessly toward the setting sun,” (Asante, 2007, pp. 1 – 2).

Before we delve into the main argument of this article, it is vitally important that readers fully understand what “Afrocentricity” really entails. To begin with, a distinction must be made between “Afrocentricity” and “Afrocentrism”. Asante is at pains to point out that “Afrocentrism” was first used by opponents of Afrocentricity who in their zeal saw it as an obverse of Eurocentrism. The use of “Afrocentrism” reflects a negation of Afrocentricity as a positive and progressive paradigm, whereas “Afrocentricity is a theory of agency; that is the idea that African people must be viewed and must view themselves as agents, rather than spectators to historical revolution and change. To this end, Afrocentricity seeks to examine every aspect of the subject place of Africans in historical, literary, architectural, ethical, philosophical, economic and political life. Afrocentricity is the re-orientation of Africans to a centred position precisely because all along African people have been operating from the fringes of Eurocentric experience” (Asante, 2007: p. 17, p. 31).

It is also critically important to note that Afrocentricity does not mean that all things African are good or useful (Asante, 2007, p. 43). Far from it; what this means is that cognisance must be taken of what Africans have done, unlike the Eurocentric approach which completely ignores Africans’ contribution to human creativity, including African history itself.

There is therefore nothing wrong in inviting other agencies such as religious organisations in this noble task of nurturing the youth so that they grow to be useful citizens. Christians, for example, can start by teaching their children Christian values as gleaned from the Bible, for example the Ten Commandments, especially the Fifth Commandment: “Honour your father and mother, so that you may live long [... on earth],” (Exodus 20: 12), and “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honour your father and mother ... [so] that it may go well with you and [so] that you may enjoy long life on earth,” (Ephesians 6: 1 – 3).

Once children have been put on the right moral track by their parents, it becomes much easier for other institutions such as schools to build on that solid foundation that will have been established by the family. All that is needed is that all the various other institutions must complement each other in this noble endeavour to guide the youth on the path of growth towards productive citizenship. Indeed, this cooperative approach is aptly captured by the age-old African saying: “It takes the whole village to raise a child.”

At this stage, it would be interesting to note that the current concerns with adolescence and youth have a very long history. The writings of influential ancient Egyptians, whom Afrocentric scholars argue were black-skinned people (Asante, 2007, p. 45), many centuries before the emergence of Christianity, are some of the examples that can be quoted as evidence of earlier debates on youth. In Ancient Greece, some of the most prominent philosophers such as Socrates and Plato propounded theories on the socialisation of children from the earliest years through adolescence and young adulthood. Among Plato’s foremost observations was that the characters of young people are subject to many changes in the course of their lives.

3.1 The characterisation of youth

Perhaps the best example of early characterisation of youth is contained in the words of another perceptive observer, who says:

The young are in character prone to desire and ready to carry any desires they may have

formed into action. Of bodily desires it is the sexual to which they are most disposed

to give way, and in regard to sexual desire they exercise no self-restraint.

They are changeful too, and fickle in their desires, which are as transitory as they are

vehement; for their wishes are keen without being permanent, like a sick man’s fits

of hunger and thirst. They are passionate, irascible, and apt to be carried away by their

impulses. They are the slaves, too, of their passions, as their ambition prevents their ever

brooking a slight and renders them indignant at the mere idea of enduring an injury. ...

They are fonder both of honour and of victory than of money, the reason why they care

so little for money being that they never yet had experience of want.

They are charitable rather than the reverse, as they have never yet been witnesses

of many villainies; and they are trustful, as they have not yet been often deceived. ...

They have high aspirations; for they have never yet been humiliated by the experience

of life, but are unacquainted with the limiting force of circumstances.

If the young commit a fault, it is always on the side of excess and exaggeration for they

carry too far, whether it be their love or hatred of anything else. They regard themselves

as omniscient and are positive in their assertion; this is, in fact, the reason of their carrying

everything too far. (Conger, 1977, p. 5)

These words sound as though they might have been written by any number of today's 21st century social commentators, but they were in fact written by Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, over 2000 years ago. From the above quotation, it can be deduced that the youth have both negative and positive characteristics, and it is therefore up to society, and indeed the youths themselves, to minimise the negatives and maximise the positives. Only in this way can the youth be expected to contribute meaningfully to the world.

3.2 The role of elders in nurturing the youth

“Elders” are by definition people of greater age, experience and authority. This is aptly captured in the Igbo proverb: “An old man sitting on a low stool sees further than a young man standing on an anthill.” In traditional African society, age is revered. The elders, whom the late Chengerai Hove calls “Guardians of the Soil” (1986) have a crucial role to play in the social development of the youth. This is fittingly captured in the Ndebele proverb “*Indlela/Inyathi ibuzwa kwabaphambili*” (The inexperienced should seek advice from those who are experienced.) (Pelling, 1977, p. 15). Indeed, award-winning South African music group Ladysmith Black Mambazo have a song with the same message: the youth must seek advice from the elders. Some of the keys lyrics of the song are:

Lalela wemuntu olahlekelwe yindlela ey'ekhaya.(Listen, you who have lost the way home.)

Nansi indlela eya ekhaya. (This is the road that leads home.)

Woza singene. (Come, let us enter the road.)

Indlela ibuzwa kwabaphambili.(Ask for directions from those who have travelled before you.)

Usemncane mfana, usemncane. (You are still too young, my boy.)

Usazokhula ubeyindoda. (You are still to mature into a man.)

Mina ngake ngabamncane.(I was once young.)

Wena awukaze ubemdala.(You have never been an adult.)

Mina zonke lezizinto ngizazi zonke.(I know all about all these things.)

Ubovulindlebe uvulingqondo. (Open your ears and your mind.)

(Ladysmith Black Mambazo, 1995, Track 3)

One cannot help but remember some of the lyrics in the 1970s song, “Teach Your Children Well” (Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, 1970, Track 6):

You, who are on the road
Must have a code that you can live by
And so, become yourself
Because the past is just a goodbye

Teach your children well
Their father's hell did slowly go by
And feed them on your dreams
The one they pick, the one you'll know by

The Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young song assumes, just like the Ladysmith Black Mambazo song, that by virtue of being older, the adults are well positioned to act as guides to the youth. Both songs view life as a journey being taken by both the young and the old. Both songs have the “road” motif, and both songs refer to elders. Clearly, it is taken for granted that the elders have “a code that [they] live by”: strong moral values that the youth must emulate. Equally important is the need for the elders to set high standards for their children, so that the youths measure their own achievements by matching them with those of their parents. The words “Teach your children well/And feed them on your dreams” are so clear and straight forward, and their message is so blunt that they need no belabouring.

Ideally, the home should be drug-free; that is to say alcohol and tobacco should not be available in the home. The dangers and evils associated with these drugs must be highlighted to the children, and hopefully, the children will stay away from them for the rest of their lives. Given the fact that the young are prone to desire, and that they are always ready to carry any desire they may have formed into action, it stands to reason that as much as possible, the home must be the last place where the young can be exposed to drugs such as alcohol and tobacco. The spate of “vuzu” parties in some of Zimbabwe’s cities, especially in Bulawayo, is a stark reminder, if any was ever needed, that not all is well in some of the homes in Zimbabwe.

“Sex, drugs, and social disorder ... the birth of Bulawayo’s Vuzu parties” was the headline story in the *Sunday News* some time ago, following an incident a few days earlier in which 131 vuzu party goers had been arrested in Bulawayo’s city centre. According to the newspaper reports, the police arrested the rowdy youths for public nuisance. “The law enforcement agents also confiscated alcohol and sex enhancing pills from teenagers headed to vuzu parties where they engage in risky unprotected sex,” (Tshili, 2019, p. 1).

According to Bruce Ndlovu, the *Sunday Life* reporter:

Vuzu parties were born in a kombi. Like a child with many fathers, no one is sure about when exactly they were born. Those who attended those first parties, however, are clear about where Vuzu parties, a social phenomenon that has turned Bulawayo upside down, were conceived. (Ndlovu, 2019, p. 2).

Ndlovu goes on to chronicle the history of these parties, earlier called “Vuzooms” around 2011; in those days they were attended mostly by students from private schools in the city, CBC, Girls’ College, Convent, Eveline, Townsend, Milton and Plumtree. With time, these parties have morphed into a monster that has swept through the city (and perhaps beyond) and has left parents and authorities gnashing their teeth and scratching their heads (Ndlovu, 2019, p.2).

“[W]hen 131 youths were arrested, many [people] were shocked at what was uncovered. ... Alcohol, condoms, drugs and vuka vuka drugs,” (Ndlovu 2019, P.2). Another news reporter who covered the same story, Nqobile Tshili, recounts that these youths were aged between 14 and 25 years (Tshili, 2019, p. 1)

It is probably too pessimistic and certainly too far-fetched to cite Wilfred Owen’s sonnet, “Anthem for doomed youth”; that poem mocks and mourns the sad waste of young lives because of war. The first line asks, rhetorically, “What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?” The point still remains – Zimbabwe’s young people are likely to meet miserable deaths if they continue on this destructive path, if they continue with their vuzu parties mentality. They will certainly die in their youth as drug and sex addicts. In these circumstances, the female participants are the major losers, because they are the ones who fall pregnant, leading to dropping out of school, while their male counterparts continue with their lives.

Having noted that with regard to sexual behaviour, the youth exercise no restraint, it stands to reason that this is one area where they definitely need most guidance. Perhaps this is easier said than done, but institutions such as the church, the school, youth clubs, to mention only three, must be implored by the family to provide sex

guidance. The home and church, for example, may insist on abstinence, but the reality is that due to peer pressure the young people will not abstain from sex.

Threats of venereal disease (some people prefer the terms sexually transmitted diseases or sexually transmitted infections or illegitimate pregnancies serve no useful purpose. They are far too confident about contraceptives and careful avoidance of disease to think there is real danger from these sources, (Durojaiye, 1972, p. 73).

The most constructive approach is to be open with the youths, and hope that whatever guidance is given to them, they will use it.

Clearly, then, if ever there was a time for full engagement with the youth by elders, this is the time.

4.0 Conclusion

The youths need to cooperate with elders if the socialisation process is to bear any fruit. There must be mutual respect between the two parties. But it is vitally important that the youths must first accept the obvious fact that elders were once young people, so they have seen it all, even if we know that circumstances may have changed. We all know the saying: “You may take a horse to the river, but you cannot force it to drink.” All that the elders can do is to provide a conducive environment in which to raise their children, and it is up to the children to take advantage of those opportunities.

5.0 Recommendations

Parents must open up and extend love to their children, at the same time encouraging them to be honest, so that the parents help them where they need to be assisted. On their part, the children must understand the meaning of the Ndebele proverb: “*Umntwana ongakhaliyo ufela embhelekweni.*” (A child that does not cry dies on its mother’s back.). This proverb clearly demonstrates that it is a two-way process between the children and the parents: the children must open up and the parents must listen. This dual-communication approach is likely to result in a win-win situation, a situation that will leave both parties satisfied.

Society must also avail guidance and counselling services to the youth, and the youth must understand that by virtue of having been once young, parents are very well placed to guide and counsel them. Once again, the Ndebele proverb “*Indlela ibuzwa kwabaphambili.*” (Seek guidance from those who have travelled before you.) says it all.

And finally, in addition to love, guidance and counselling which society should extend to the youth, guardianship must also be readily available. Elders know that there are evil elements out there. Clearly, the child is safer inside the house, than outside, especially at night. Parents should therefore also guard their children and if the children cooperate there will be no need to invoke the proverb “*Isala kutshelwa sibona ngomopho.*” (Those who are impervious to advice end up in trouble.).

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