Chapter 19

Old People’s Homes (OPHS) and Intergenerational Cultural Transfer Discontinuity in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Two claims were defended in this chapter. Firstly, the chapter argued that, whilst old people’s homes (OPHs) were critical in caring for the destitute elderly in postcolonial Zimbabwe, inadvertently, they were undermining intergenerational cultural transfer. Secondly, OPHs were presented as concomitant with dysfunctional family institutions in Zimbabwe. Accordingly, this chapter interrogated the role of OPHs to establish the extent to which these institutions contribute to the discontinuity of intergenerational cultural transfer in Zimbabwe, especially among the Shona people. The interrogation was located within Gade’s (2011) theoretical framework of ‘narratives of return’. On that basis, a case was made for Zimbabwean society in general and the family in particular, to seriously reconsider its traditional and fundamental role of caring for the elderly without recourse to OPHs as an exigency.

INTRODUCTION

The major concern of this chapter is not to debate upon the relevance or otherwise of old people’s homes (OPHs) in Zimbabwe and elsewhere. Rather, the main concern is to open up further conversations on other ways of perceiving and interrogating the functions of OPHs within the postcolonial Zimbabwean socio-cultural spaces. Specifically, the purpose of this chapter is to interrogate the role and place of old people’s homes (OPHs) in postcolonial African spaces. However, given the limited scope of this chapter, the author focuses on Zimbabwe, formerly a British colony. It is instructive to mention at the onset that, OPHs are examined through the lens of the indigenous Shona people of Zimbabwe. The Shona are one of the major indigenous ethnic groups in Zimbabwe (Gelfand, 1973; Hamutyinei & Plangger,
In terms of population, the Shona represent about seventy-six percent (76%) of the population of Zimbabwe (Mangena, 2011 & 2012; Mapara, 2009). The remaining twenty-four percent (24%) consists of the Ndebele, Tonga, Shangaan, the ‘whites’ (Weinrich, 1997), and various other local ethnic groups.

It is essential to mention at the onset that this chapter is premised on the major claim that OPHs in Zimbabwe, and elsewhere in postcolonial Africa, are viewed as being concomitant with the challenge of intergenerational cultural discontinuity between the elderly (vakwegura) and the younger generations of their respective families and society (Makuvaza, 2008 & 2015). To this end, two claims are defended in this chapter. To start with, the institution of OPHs or ‘homes’, as it is widely referred to here in Zimbabwe, is presented as a recent development in the African postcolonial space. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that from an indigenous postcolonial African-Shona perspective, and notwithstanding other factors, the evidence of ‘homes’ in society is viewed as testimony to a dysfunctional traditional family institution. Thus, this can be situated and appreciated within the broader context of the after-effects of imperialism, capitalism and industrialisation on the periphery (Nyanguru, 2009). Consequently, it is argued that the family institution is failing to provide one of its essential services to society, namely, the caring for all its members, particularly the elderly (vakwegura). Hence in some cases, the elderly or senior citizens (vakwegura) find themselves being sent to institutions such as the old people’s homes (OPHs) for accommodation and care by strangers. Lastly, and very critical to this chapter, it is argued that OPHs are inadvertently undermining intergenerational cultural transfer between the elderly (vakwegura) and the younger generation.

In substantiating the above claims, the chapter uses the lenses firstly of the author’s positionality as an indigenous postcolonial African who grew up in a typical traditional African setting interacting with his elderly grandparents (sekuru and mbuya) within a family setting. Furthermore, the author draws insights from discourses on African indigenous knowledge systems (AIKS). These perspectives are considered crucial to this chapter on the grounds that the chirere chigokurerawo ethic (bring it up well; tomorrow it will look after you) (to be examined later) among the indigenous Shona hereby presented is considered as a mitigating intervention against the challenge of intergenerational cultural transfer discontinuity. This ethic can best be understood and appreciated through the lenses of Shona indigenous knowledge system (SIKS). Overall, the discussion is situated within the context of conversations on ‘narratives of return’ (Gade, 2011; Nabudere, 2011; Nkrumah, 1970).

To address the stated problem of intergenerational cultural transfer discontinuity, the chapter presents the following propositions. Firstly, it proposes the possible revitalisation of the traditional roles of the family institution as well as society at large, in so far as caring for all its members, particularly the elderly (vakwegura) is concerned. This is based on the assertion that, notwithstanding the other roles and functions performed by the family in traditional African societies, this particular role of caring for its members, especially the elderly (vakwegura), was considered as fundamental (Nyanguru, 1990; Rwezaura, 1989; Sagomba, 1987; Makuvaza, 2015). In particular, the chapter argues for the repositioning of the chirere chigokurerawo ethic within the family’s socialisation of the young generations in postcolonial Zimbabwe. This is based on the claim that if the young generations are initiated as well as socialised into this type of thinking, they will subsequently come to see the value firstly, of their grandparents in their lives, and secondly as a consequence, will come to care for them in their old age. Furthermore, the chapter urges for the introduction of the said ethic in formal education systems in Zimbabwe, starting from as early as ECD. It is anticipated that, with the introduction of this particular ethic in schools, this may go a long way in reducing the number of the elderly being sent to OPHs by their family members.
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