

Old wine in new wineskins: Revisiting counselling in traditional Ndebele and Shona societies.

¹Sambulo Ndlovu, ²Elizabeth F. Hove

Great Zimbabwe University. Faculty of Arts, Department of African Languages and Literature
Great Zimbabwe University. Faculty of Arts, Department of English and Performing Arts

Abstract: *The institution of counselling is present in all human communities as people share their sorrows, mentor, empower and advise each other. The service of advising and grooming is all that counselling is. This paper seeks to explore the institution of counselling in Shona and Ndebele traditional societies before the advent of western formalised counselling institutions. The research sets to prove that counselling is not a new phenomenon in these societies, that is a remnant of colonialism but rather it is an old institution that has been window dressed with western strategies and formalisms. African traditional counselling strategies as seen in the Shona and Ndebele examples emphasise more on the preventive forms of counselling than crisis counselling. Advice and mentoring are prioritised in these societies as a way of helping people stay out of trouble that in future will require therapeutic or crisis counselling. Modern day counselling has been professionalised and commercialised and requires people to pay for it yet in Shona and Ndebele traditional societies it was part of one's responsibility to make sure others are well advised and counselled if they are emotionally troubled. Professional counselling in marriage, career guidance, teenage grooming for example is not a new practice but an old practice done differently like old wine in new wineskins.*

I. Introduction

“I am, because we are and since we are, therefore I am”

Counselling is one aspect of life that has been a component of societies since time immemorial. The Zimbabwean context is no exception since problems were there and were solved way before the advent of professional counselling in the yesteryear Ndebele and Shona communities. Professional institutions and professional counsellors are indeed a new phenomenon in the Zimbabwean context but counselling, as helping is not new. The Shona and the Ndebele of yesteryear were functional in every aspect of life, counselling was given to equip people even before they got into crisis therefore most of it was preventative counselling than correctional counselling. Communication and experience were what a counsellor needed to counsel someone. Furthermore counselling was done within the family and the community for little or no cost at all. Religion or spirituality was part of the day to day life and helped to solve the psychological problems of the victims.

Modernity resulted in disintegration of the close family unit and the community hence the rise of professional counselling. The traditional system fell apart and victims could not refer to the traditional counsellors in the family and thus professional counselling became an option. In both Shona and Ndebele cultures there remains a remnant of this practice which makes it worth revisiting in light of new counselling practices. In the olden day it was a process and a way of life, incorporated in culture and celebrated together with the culture of the Ndebele and the Shona. Problems were shared then and are still shared today, although in this age the sharing is done professionally and usually to get the help you need to part with some money, all this points to the fact that counselling is not new phenomenon in the Zimbabwean context in relation to the Ndebele and Shona people of the country.

Defining counselling

Counselling entails the sharing of a problem in confidence with someone you believe is better able to understand and help you cope with the realities of your predicament. Newsroom and Keith (1993:468) define counselling as: “discussion of a problem that usually has emotional content with an individual in order to help the individual cope with it better”. The European Association for Counselling further defines counselling as:

An interactive learning process contracted between counsellor(s) and client(s), be they individuals, families, groups, or institutions, which approaches in a holistic way, social, cultural, economic and/ or emotional issues. Counselling may be concerned with addressing and resolving specific problems, making decisions, coping with crisis, improving relationships, developmental issues, promoting and developing self awareness, working with feelings, thoughts, perceptions and internal or external conflict. (EAC definition of counselling adopted AGM 1995).

From the above definitions it can be deduced that counselling involves the process of giving advice or guidance. To seek counsel is to seek the advice, guidance or help of someone by talking about what is wrong and getting assistance in finding solutions to problems.

The Traditional Shona/Ndebele counsellor

In traditional counselling there were and are people who did and do the task of counselling. To be a counsellor one was schooled through experience in most cases to handle delicate situations that demanded mental soothing and problem solving. Ndebele and Shona cultures have people tasked with the counselling in different problem situations.

Sahwira (Very Close Family Friend)

The Shona people of Zimbabwe had a way of making sure problems are discussed which helped during the days when professional counselling was not there. This phenomena is the 'sahwira culture', a sahwira¹ is a close friend of a family or someone, whom they tell their problems. A sahwira is and was in days gone by told problems by a family or one of the spouses and was better equipped to solve their problems whether marital or otherwise. A sahwira was a counsellor because he or she knew everything about the friend to the extent that when the friend died he came handy in showing people what the dead friend used to like or do.

In times of marital problems the sahwira was the one both spouses went to for marital counselling. In this way the marital problem which is of extensive emotional content is shared with the sahwira and the affected party in the marriage is helped to cope better after and with the problem. Going by Newsroom's definition of counselling it is not new to the Shona as a sahwira helped the affected party with discussing the emotional problem and helping them cope better. In Ndebele culture friends "abangane" do counsel affected friends but the umngane is not institutionalised into Ndebele counselling as it is in Shona.

Tete/ubabakazi (Aunt)

Modern day counsellors usually in the area of sex, relationships and marriage in the media (Facebook, magazines, and newspapers) are usually referred to as Auntie be it Rhoda, Thandi, Rose² to mean tete. These modern day aunties provide advice on issues to do with sex, love, marriage. This figure in Shona tradition played and still plays a pivotal role in counselling especially young ladies. She was usually the Father's sister and in some cases is referred as baba vechikadzi (as in female father) as is also in Ndebele, ubabakazi. The aunt would constantly give advice to her brothers children from a very young age through marriage. She played a pivotal role of guidance in her bothers family and would be constantly called upon. Gelfand (1996:27) aver:

Girls are similarly taught by their aunts, vanatete, and grandmothers, vanambuya to be chaste until they get married. Girls would be taught some of the following; to sit in a modest way, when to keep aloof from males, what to say and what not to say and what to say in the presence of the opposite sex, how to react to courting proposals, how to behave towards a boyfriend, how to behave when married, to avoid annoying her husband and to control her temper in general, and to avoid sexual intercourse until married and to avoid adultery.

She not only played an advisory role to the brother's children but also to the brother's marriage. She would often be called upon to solve disputes between her brother and his wife. To help the aunt was the maternal uncle who would also be called upon in matters that needed a male figure.

Sekuru³/umalume (maternal uncle)

Usually counselling the boys or young men was and still is sekuru/umalume or uncle. The Uncle was usually the mother's brother or cousin thus he was the maternal uncle. He would be there to guide the young men from an early age. He would be called upon to counsel the young men as they reached puberty and eventually married. The maternal uncle served as a teenage counsellor who took the boys through their usually trouble filled teen years. The uncle's counselling duties as partially prescribed by tradition continue even when the boy gets married, the uncle tries by all means to get as much training in counselling from friends and elders so as to be there for his nephew when he needs counselling.

Grandparents

Wisdom comes with age. The elderly in the family usually ambuya/ugogo(grandmother) and sekuru/ubabamkhulu (grandfather) were always custodians of good family values. Gelfand (1996:55) notes;

¹ The sahwira culture is used by Nyaradzo funeral group in Zimbabwe as their motto is 'sahwira mukuru'. This is taken from the duties expected of a sahwira in Shona grief counselling.

² These are names of media aunties that help people who write to the press for counselling.

³ While sekuru in Shona would include the grand father a cousins here it refers to the mother's brother.

“The grandfather (maternal or paternal) was responsible for the sex education of his grandsons and for warning them, to keep their purity until they marry.” This applied in both Ndebele and Shona communities. The grandparents worked closely with the aunt to guide the young in the family. Girls were counselled by their grandmothers and aunts when they reached puberty as in the words of Ndlovu (et al):

Kwabanye kwakusithi inkazana ingathomba, unina ayitshele ukuthi iyelalla konina khulu... (1995:81) (When a girl reached puberty her mother told her to go and sleep at her grandmother’s place...).

In this way the grandmother gave her teenage granddaughter counselling and performed some initiation rites and the counselling prepared the girl ready for life’s eventualities. However, in both traditional Shona and Ndebele societies the whole community participated in guiding and advising the child because a child is everyone’s.

N’anga/Inyanga (Traditional healer/ medicine man)

The medicine men were a very important part of the Ndebele and Shona societies; they were the wisdom tank through supernatural powers and their experience. A medicine man never took to a patient without any conversation and suggestions to the cause of the problem, much that Mbiti says:

On the whole, the medicine man gives much time and attention to the patient, which enables him to penetrate deep into the psychological state of the patient. (1969:169).

In taking time with the patient the medicine men got to understand the mental condition of the patient and gave counsel to help the patient cope psychologically. This duty of the N’angas and Nyangas shows that they were crisis counsellors who helped people in their time of psychological need. The traditional healers are responsible for healing and soothing tormented souls among other ailments.

As seen above the aunt, uncle, grandparents, and even the traditional healers all played a pivotal role in the development of the moral fibre of the youth and the family at large. ‘It takes a village to raise a child’, is a common saying in African traditional societies and this is the reason counselling took place at all levels in the society. What happened to the whole village or community affected everyone within that particular community or village and in reverse everything that affected the whole affected the individual (Mbiti: 1969).

The role of folklore and religion

Ndebele and Shona folklore are rich in proverbs and folktales that give guidance to people in their lives and problems. The proverbs are said to be a cultural asset that helps in matters of counselling and guidance, they are a powerful linguistic force used in counselling discourse. Vambe (2004:10) avers:

The oral stories themselves functioned to warn, caution, advise, praise, denounce and urge people to the extent that these oral artists ‘ruled’ the lives of their patrons. The stories provided the cultural rules that underpinned the community’s way of life, or the sum-total of their philosophical outlook.

Folklore expresses the fact that the elderly were also counsellors in history, since there were no counsellors and professional counselling institutions. Those in the spiritual realm were believed to be watching over the community Gelfand (1996:67) notes; “When they said ‘Vakuru vakati [...]’ (the elders said) they were not referring to the living elders only but also to those who died in the past. These elders include the ancestors of the living and in Shona/Ndebele worldview they have joined the spirit world which controls the day to day activities.” The fear of being rebuked by the ancestors kept the youth and the people in general checked. This did not apply to the youth only but to the rest of the community.

Elders were counsellors since they had gone through life’s experiences. The Ndebele and Shona proverb; isalakutshelwa sibona ngomopho/ ramba kuudzwa akawonekwa nembonje pahuma (one who refuses counsel is seen by scars), proves that there was counselling and that those who did not listen to counselling fall into problems such as suicide and other cases of mental disorders. The young were told to turn to the elderly for counsel using folklore, the Shona proverb kuziva mbuya huudzwa/inyathi ibuzwa kwabaphambili; (seek counsel from the elderly) shows that the elderly were counsellors unto the young and growing. The elderly were counsellors; it shows that counselling is indeed not a new phenomenon in the Zimbabwean context. The Ndebele say; indlela ibuzwa kwabaphambili; (the way is asked from those in front) this means that elders played a role in the counselling process. Proverbs were also part of a wider range of counsel which, Ndlovu (et al) say their purpose was:

Injongo yezixwayiso yayingeyokuthi abantwana besabe ukwenza izinto lezo okuthiwa bengazenzi ngesikhathi besesebancane. (1995:193). (The purpose of counsel was to hinder the young from doing things that were dangerous to them).

Proverbs were thus a source of instruction in traditional African societies and were meant to deter both the young and old.

In the holistic African culture everything was functional including religion, it served as counsel to many people who were psychologically cured by the traditional doctors. It was part of religion and life that the young had to listen to counsel from the elders or even friends, when the problem was persistent the person could

consult the n'angas/inyanga and medicine –men. People lived as a community some problems were shared by many people as a community problem in this way sharing the problems made them half as heavy as a Shona proverb says; rume rimwe harikombi churu or chara chimwe hachitswanyi inda or zano ndega akapisa jira (one man cannot do it all alone or face challenges by himself).

The Ndebele also have a proverb that emphasises on sharing problems as a way of solving it; injobo ithungelwa ebandla (a problem shared is half solved). In today's world clergymen are part of the counselling profession as they are consulted by people in problems. Religion itself is a source of strength for someone with a psychological problem, believing in some religion can help one find a way of coping with problems. The Shona and the Ndebele traditional religions emphasise on the practicality of religion in problem solving.

In problems like diseases, barrenness and economic problems n'anga/izinyanga, could help the affected by the traditional rite of ukuthethela/kupira; (appeasing the spirits) when this was done the affected were settled in mind as it was believed that the spirits would help. Bozongwana (1983) says "because they are able to call upon the spirits to assist in the fight against pestilence izinyanga helped in strengthening the morale of the nation". Counselling in most cases involves boosting someone's morale in life, Bozongwana (1983) rightfully states; "before the advent of the whites in Zimbabwe counselling was already there".

Communalism made it easy for people to have a healthy state of mind; they lived and worked as a community. They sang songs as a community that had a counselling effect especially at weddings and funerals, wise men and women of the village were consulted as "the wisdom of the grey heads". The coming of colonialism came with urbanisation which in turn came with many problems and it also saw the institutionalisation of counselling.

Old wine in new wineskins

Professional counselling today borrows heavily from traditional ways of counselling and counselling is not new to the Zimbabwean context. Counselling was not only preventive but crisis counselling was also there in traditional customs. There were people who were better able to deal with crisis situations for certain individuals. Counselling is a remedy to mental sickness, which is why Newstrom (1993:468) points out that "counselling seeks to improve the individual's mental health". Today people are trained professionally as counsellors and these are the people who are new in the Zimbabwean context. They take counselling as a fulltime job on a salary, these people are trained in human psychology but traditional counsellors took everything from experience. Taylor and Stewart (1991:90) refer to these people as "some people, such as social workers and psychologists, are professional counsellors."

The traditional counsellor has equivalent roles in today's society and these include psychiatrists, pastors, prophets, psychotherapists, doctors, peer educators, teachers, social workers, sociologists, marriage counsellors, financial advisors and among others. Counselling today is usually done in the following categories; Marriage/ family counselling, mental health, rehabilitation, addiction, school and career guidance and counselling. Professional counselling was not there but what the professional counsellors do today was done by the traditional counsellors who were in most cases the aunts and other elderly people.

Problems that needed crisis counselling were also prevalent in the olden days and they never went unattended to. There were counsellors that dealt with crisis situations. Taylor and Stewart argue:

Are you tete or sekuru to some young person who needs guidance? Every time you have comforted him and helped him decide made you gain experience in counselling (1991:90).

This shows that elders like aunts and uncles to some people were very experienced counsellors who helped people out of their problems in those days and continue to do so proving that counselling was there before westernisation.

The institution of counselling is very broad and it is difficult to train a holistic counsellor. The categorisation of counsellors in professional counselling serves a capitalist model of creating many jobs. What was done by one traditional counsellor has now been categorised into several counselling jobs. What was done effectively by one traditional counsellor is done by many professional counsellors, only this time (in most cases) with little contact and impact. Kottler and Sherpard (2010:25) aver:

As you may already be aware, there are tremendous disagreements regarding professional identity and who has the superior education and training to provide the best possible help. Psychiatrists, social workers, psychiatric nurses, psychologist, marriage and family therapists, counsellors, pastoral care workers, and human service specialists all claim that their particular approach to psychological concerns is the one and only way to relieve emotional distress.

Colonialism and modernity affected traditional counselling; the roles of the aunts, uncles, izinyanga and sawiras are compromised in modernity. However they have been replaced by professional aunts and izinyanga in the form of psychologists and clergymen. Even the media has become a platform for these modern day professional counsellors. Columns like the once popular Aunty Rhoda in the now defunct magazine Parade, Facebook pages like, Kuzeya nyaya dzerudo,dzebonde natete Rose nasekuru Joe (Reflecting on love and sex

issues with Aunt Rose and Uncle Joe) and many other counselling columnists and bloggers all claim to have the answers to the crisis society faces today. To further authenticate their roles they have taken on the titles of aunt and uncle. This fulfils the assertion that all forms of counselling were there, whether preventative, correctional or crisis, none of them is a new phenomenon in the Zimbabwean context.

Shona and Ndebele counselling is holistic and depended on virtues of trust, honesty and communal trust. The community was structured to minimize problem situations. Revisiting these old traditional ways of counselling can help in alleviating current crisis situations such as HIV/AIDS.

II. Conclusion

The Shona and the Ndebele of Zimbabwe like all human aggregates had their challenging and crisis situations before the coming of the whites through colonialism. All the problems had people who helped the affected cope or overcome the situations. The communities depended on family relations, friends and especially elder members of families to solve problems through counselling. Oral literature such as proverbs and folktales were also used as forms of counselling and guidance. Traditional religion served as a counselling platform and spiritual leaders in society offered counselling to those who needed it. Counselling as an institution and all its classes and types was part of the Shona and Ndebele civilisations this is analogous to the old wine which is re-packaged in modernity to create the professional counselling.

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