Chapter 15

Child Resilience, Survival, and Development:
Voices of Orphans in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This chapter draws on a study which was conducted over a period of one and half years on orphans in Zimbabwe. While this chapter discusses extensive issues around resilience, survival and development of children, the highlights on their wellness are critically engaged with as well. The aim is to provide empirical insights to current and emerging debates on experiences of orphans especially from a developing country's perspective and Zimbabwe in particular. Drawing on the Ubuntu theory and the Wellness theory, the chapter consists of two sections. In section one; the chapter shall conceptualise the notions of Child Resilience, Survival and Development and further explore Ubuntu and Wellness through a theoretical lens. In section two there will be an in-depth discussion on issues around resilience, survival and development of orphans and how these are impacting their wellness.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, it is argued that in African Traditional Communities, there were "no orphans" since every child belonged to the whole community. The whole community ensured that each orphan got proper support and care, thereby confirming Mbiti's (1969) proverbial saying; "I am because we are". People cherished living in large numbers sharing whatever they had as well as observing the expected norms and values and imparting them to their children. The African community used to be one but extended large family and all African languages generally still have words for uncles, aunts' cousin and niece who comprise the entire family (Kanu, 2010). Marriage was taken as a good and serious commitment in the sense that it is a covenant between two (extended) families, kindred and villages. "Living together" and the sense of "community of brothers and sisters" are the basis of, and the expression of, the extended family system in Africa. This arrangement guaranteed social security for the poor, old, widowed, and

orphaned children which is one of the most admired values in the traditional African socio-economic arrangement. This communitarian culture does not exist in the Western perspective which is characterised by individualism and the nuclear family structure. In the African community, a man had the obligation to cater for the widow and orphans of his deceased relative. Failure to do so earned him strong public rebuke and as a result, it was difficult to find someone in the community without help (Kanu, 2010). In essence, the extended family was a veritable instrument in the family cohesion and community continuity and stability. However, it is noted that with the advent of urbanisation and westernisation, most of the families are now a nuclear family in nature and as consequence weakened the social security structures.

BACKGROUND

The Traditional Family

In the African traditional family, the community was the custodian of the individual; hence the individual was to go where the community goes. In light of the above statement, a popular African proverb to express the African sense of community says "Go the way that many people go; if you go alone, you will have reason to lament" (Thumi & Horsfield, 2004). This implies that the African idea of security and its value depended on personal identification with and within the community. In the Traditional family, harmony was rated as the most important value for all family members (Shizha & Charema, 2008). In light of the above view, Foster, Makufa, Drew and Kralovec (1997) maintain that traditional life was characterised by brotherhood, a sense of belonging to a large family and by groups rather than individuals. Children in general and orphans, in particular, were expected to grow up accustomed to expectations of the community just like any other children who had parents. Therefore, the whole community had an obligation to see to it that, orphans were engaged in community activities all the time.

A sense of hospitality used to be inherently indispensable in the survival of African values. There used to be a spontaneous welcome and accommodation to strangers and visitor (Ekeke & Ekeopora, 2010). Africans would easily incorporate strangers and give them land to settle hoping that they would one day leave and the land would revert to the owner (Kanu, 2010). It was, thus, the willingness to give, to help, to assist, to love and to carry one another's burden without profit or reward as the driving force. Unlike in the Western culture, no appointment and special invitation were needed for one to visit a distant relation or neighbour. On arrival when there is food, the visitor is invited to eat. The visitor would be treated kindly, just as one would wish to be treated when visiting another home.

The extended family heads would be seen inculcating this value of among orphans. This value, particularly in the Zimbabwean Shona philosophy, is based on the proverb which says *Mweni haapedzi dura* literary translated means "a visitor does not finish the contents of the granary". Another aspect of hospitality which was highly cherished among African cultures was sharing with the needy neighbours who came for assistance (Kanu, 2010). In this circumstance, anybody who did not assist was regarded as a bad community member (Soro, 2007). The extended family heads welcomed and co-opted orphans into their families. This action was meant to reinforce the African idea that orphans were not strangers in a community hence the African community emphasised on the value of giving and sharing with other community members (Nyaumwe, & Mkabela, 2007). This value is based on the Zimbabwean Shona philosophy which says *Chaibva chaora* literary translated in the Shona language means "food which has been cooked cannot be kept for a longer time for future use, it is already spoilt**."** Extended family heads

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