

Decolonization of social work: A panacea for effective and efficient social work practice in post-colonial Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at showcasing the importance of decolonization of social work as a strategy for effective and efficient indigenous social work practice in Nigeria. This study sees the continuous dependence and utilization of alien theories, paradigms, perspectives, and methods constructed or developed predominantly with little or no consideration of the multi-cultural context of the practice field in Nigeria as alienate, thus neo-colonialization. It argues that colonization as a fact of ideas, not essentially of governance, is made possible through indoctrination. It sees western education: driven essentially by western based curricular, philosophies, theories, and methods as agents of neo-colonialization. These, the paper argues, relegates, indigenous knowledge and demonizes indigenous cultural practices thus making it difficult, for effective, and fruitful social work practice in post-colonial multi-ethnic states such as Nigeria. The paper believes that even though indigenization of social work practice is a vital means to achieving a result-oriented practice, its potentials for absoluteness is limited by its dependence on non-indigenous theories, perspectives and methods for practice. A mental re-orientation on the reality of the multi-cultural practice field, with its accompanying diverse norms, values, language and worldview together with practical effort at re-abstraction, and reconstruction of the knowledge base of the practice through utilization of indigenous knowledge and methods is a way out of decolonization and a guarantee for a more effective, efficient and inclusive social work practice.

Keywords: Decolonization, Indoctrination, Neo-colonialization, Indigenous knowledge, Indigenization, norms, values, re-abstraction, reconstruction and re-orientation.

Introduction

The social work profession in Nigeria, like many African countries, has been significantly influenced by its colonial history. The enduring challenges of post-colonial social work practice in Nigeria are deeply rooted in the continued application of social work theories and models inherited from colonial powers. According to Mbah et al. (2017) and Okoye (2013), post-colonial Nigeria housed a social welfare system that was well understood and practiced by its diverse ethnic groups to meet the needs of vulnerable populations. However, the colonial legacy has led to a loss of traditional practices, contributing to a multi-generational trauma that has affected indigenous people in Nigeria (Andrea, 2013).

Colonialism, as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2000) observed, refers to the cultural exploitation that developed with European expansion over the last 400 years, impacting the economy, culture, politics, and social structures of the colonies (Ntangwa, 2019). Despite political independence, many African countries, including Nigeria, continue to be influenced by colonial legacies in social work practice (Ntangwa, 2019; Nyirenda, 1977). The dominance of Western social work models, approaches, methodologies, and theories has hindered the effectiveness and efficiency of social work practice in Nigeria (Lagan, 2018).

Decolonizing social work in Nigeria is crucial for enhancing practice and professionalism through the integration of indigenous knowledge. Most client problems and challenges stem from traditional values, culture, and African traditional religion (Ntangwa, 2020). Social work practice in Nigeria, particularly in the post-colonial era, must evolve to incorporate indigenous-based theories and models to improve its effectiveness and relevance. Ugiagbe (2016) argues that imported theories like structural functionalism, behaviorism, and psychological theories must give way to indigenous system theories that can explain both client challenges and the social system and structure from a traditional/cultural perspective.

Post-colonial social work practice must focus on service providers aimed at supporting the recovery of indigenous people from the impacts of colonization using multi-dimensional approaches (Andrea, 2013). As Bettiste (2000) argues, post-colonialism is not just a time after

colonialism but represents a hope yet to be achieved, involving rethinking conceptual, institutional, cultural, legal, and other boundaries assumed universal to indigenous people. This should be the primary focus of post-colonial social work for effectiveness and efficiency.

Social work in pre-colonial Nigeria

In pre-colonial Nigeria, social work was an integral part of the community and was practiced through the extended family system, age-grade associations, and other communal structures. These traditional systems provided care and support to individuals in need, including the poor, the elderly, orphans, widows, and those with mental illnesses. The extended family was the primary institution responsible for the welfare of its members, ensuring that no one was left without care or support. This system was based on the principles of reciprocity, mutual aid, and collective responsibility, which were deeply embedded in the cultural values of the society (Mbah et al., 2017).

The age-grade system, which was prevalent among many ethnic groups in Nigeria, also played a significant role in social work practices. Age grades were groups of people within the same age range who shared similar responsibilities and duties within the community. These groups often engaged in community development projects, helped the needy, and enforced social norms and values. Through these structures, social welfare was administered, and social justice was maintained. In addition to the extended family and age-grade systems, traditional rulers and religious institutions also played crucial roles in social work. Chiefs, kings, and religious leaders were seen as custodians of the community's welfare. They were responsible for ensuring the well-being of their subjects and often mediated disputes, provided for the poor, and offered support to those in distress. The religious institutions, particularly in the Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa communities, provided a moral and spiritual framework for social work, emphasizing the importance of compassion, charity, and social justice.

These indigenous practices were effective in meeting the needs of people through ethnic and cultural values embedded within the society (Ben-Ari & Stier, 2010). The social work practices in pre-colonial Nigeria were holistic, community-based, and culturally relevant, reflecting the worldview and cosmology of the people. They were rooted in the belief that every individual had a role to play in the welfare of the community and that the well-being of the community was inextricably linked to the well-being of its members.

Social work in post-colonial Nigeria

The advent of colonialism in Nigeria brought significant changes to the social, political, and economic structures of the society. The colonial administration introduced Western social work practices and institutions, which were often at odds with the indigenous practices that had been in place for centuries. The colonial government established formal social welfare services, including schools, hospitals, and orphanages, which were modeled after Western institutions. These services were primarily focused on the urban areas and were designed to serve the interests of the colonial administration rather than the needs of the indigenous population.

Post-colonial social work in Nigeria operates within the confines of neo-colonialism in methodology and theoretical synthesis (Anucha, 2008). The practice of social work in post-colonial Nigeria faces several challenges, including the lack of acknowledgment and professionalization of social work with established laws in Nigeria and other African countries (Amada-Sun, 2019). Although Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the legacy of colonialism continues to influence social work practices in the country. Many of the concepts, methods of intervention, and theoretical frameworks used in social work today are derived from Western models, which do not always align with the cultural realities and needs of the Nigerian population. One of the major challenges facing social work in post-colonial Nigeria is the lack

of recognition and professionalization of the field. Unlike in many Western countries, where social work is a well-established profession with clear standards, regulations, and professional bodies, social work in Nigeria remains largely unregulated. This has led to a lack of standardization in social work education and practice, with many social workers receiving little or no formal training. As a result, social work in Nigeria is often seen as a voluntary or charitable activity rather than a professional discipline.

Another challenge is the continued reliance on colonial models of social work, which do not adequately address the unique cultural, social, and economic contexts of Nigeria. Post-colonial theories, models, and practices remain anchored in colonial theories, with Nigeria inheriting constructed concepts, methods of intervention, methodologies, and theories from colonizers, influencing post-colonial social work practice (Hoxie, 2008). These models often emphasize individualism, professional detachment, and formalized procedures, which can be at odds with the communal, relational, and culturally embedded practices of traditional Nigerian social work.

Baikie (2009), Sinclair, Hart, and Bruyere (2009) argue that countries like the United States, Canada, and Britain continue to colonize indigenous people today, as many indigenous languages, technologies, social structures, ceremonies, belief systems, and ways of life developed before colonization. According to Dickason and McNab (2009), these concepts and practices still exist and could enhance understanding and practice of social work in post-colonial Nigeria. These scholars suggest that social work in post-colonial Nigeria should incorporate indigenous knowledge, practices, and values, rather than relying solely on Western models.

In recent years, there has been a growing movement to decolonize social work in Nigeria and other African countries. This movement advocates for the integration of indigenous knowledge, practices, and values into social work education and practice. It calls for a shift away from the colonial models that have dominated the field and towards a more culturally relevant and contextually appropriate approach to social work. According to Ashcroft (2001), post-colonial social work approaches should include the worldview and cosmology of indigenous people affected by colonization. This includes recognizing the importance of communal living, collective responsibility, and the extended family system in the welfare of individuals and communities.

However, the process of decolonizing social work in Nigeria is fraught with challenges. The dominance of Western models in social work education and practice means that many social workers in Nigeria are trained in approaches that do not reflect the realities of their communities. Moreover, the lack of professionalization and regulation of the field makes it difficult to implement standardized, culturally relevant practices across the country. Despite these challenges, there are examples of social work practices in Nigeria that successfully integrate indigenous knowledge and values. For instance, some community-based organizations in Nigeria have adopted a participatory approach to social work, involving community members in the design and implementation of social welfare programs. These organizations recognize the importance of local knowledge and the role of the community in addressing social issues. They work closely with traditional leaders, religious institutions, and other community structures to ensure that their programs are culturally relevant and sustainable.

However, the nature of social work in pre-colonial and post-colonial Nigeria reflects the complex interplay of indigenous practices, colonial influences, and contemporary challenges. While social work in pre-colonial Nigeria was deeply rooted in traditional African

cultural norms, values, and practices, the advent of colonialism introduced Western models that continue to influence social work in post-colonial Nigeria. The practice of social work in post-colonial Nigeria faces several challenges, including the lack of recognition and professionalization of the field and the continued reliance on colonial models that do not adequately address the unique cultural, social, and economic contexts of Nigeria. However, there is a growing movement to decolonize social work in Nigeria and integrate indigenous knowledge, practices, and values into social work education and practice. This movement represents an important step towards creating a more culturally relevant and contextually appropriate approach to social work in Nigeria. By embracing the rich cultural heritage of pre-colonial Nigeria and addressing the challenges of post-colonialism, social work in Nigeria can better serve the needs of its people and contribute to the overall development of the country.

Problems of colonial heritage in social work

The problems of social work in contemporary Nigeria center on the application of Western Eurocentric theories and models. Ife (2016) observed that post-colonial social work practice in Nigeria involves the imposition of Western worldviews, values, languages, and ideas, often considered superior to traditional beliefs, values, and models. According to Bennett and Green (2018), post-colonial social work is embedded with physical and cultural genocide perpetrated by British invaders, using ideologies of racial prejudice to decenter and outlaw indigenous languages and epistemologies, neglecting indigenous cultures. This failure to recognize indigenous history, multi-ethnic conceptions, and the cosmopolitan nature of Nigerian society (Bennett & Green, 2018) hinders social work practice.

The integration of indigenous social work to suit the Western system introduced frameworks anchored on Christian and Islamic religions, such as the Zakat system and almsgiving, which have eroded the traditional social welfare system centered on family and communal services (Mbah et al., 2017). These factors undermine the development of indigenous social work practice in post-colonial Nigeria. Dei (2008) opined that an indigenous knowledge framework contextualizes identity within history, separate from Eurocentric and Euro-American constructions of identity. This framework empowers communities and individuals, helping to reconstruct post-colonial indigenous-dominated representations in Nigeria and the diaspora.

Decolonization: The way to effective and efficient social work practice

Decolonizing social work practice in Nigeria requires a shift from colonial methodologies, theories, and philosophies. This shift is necessary because colonization has influenced the perspectives and privileged status of social service providers, including social workers often employed by the government to represent government interests (Tamburro). Anti-colonialist social work scholars argue that holistic social work education, practice, and research can be achieved through the integration of theoretical frameworks based on indigenous anti-colonial and contemplative social work pedagogy (Kan, 2019).

The principal factor for decolonization as a panacea for effective social work practice is for social workers to play a role in delivering effective spiritual practices within the post-colonial framework in Nigeria. According to Lavalley (2010), domesticating indigenous social work requires social workers to collaborate with elders, traditional healers, medicine men and women, and establish protocols in their agencies to enhance indigenous knowledge and decolonize colonial philosophies. This collaboration is essential because colonial social work is not designed to respond to the interests of colonized indigenous knowledge and practice (Abdi, 2012).

The professionalism of social work in contemporary Nigeria cannot be achieved without strengthening the traditional frontiers of social work practice in post-colonial Nigeria. Critical traditional social work units that need strengthening include community-based organizations, religious groups, age grades, town unions, philanthropists, and traditional mechanisms for effective social protection and care (Abegunde, 2009; Ayangunna, 2010; Odumosu, Oluaniyi & Alonge, 2009). According to Mel Gray et al. (2013), practical methods for a self-reliant and decolonized social work practice include traditional ceremonies that enhance indigenous knowledge and self-esteem, traditional Nigerian foods that reflect ethnic and racial identification, and healing processes that reflect Nigeria's cultural diversity.

Tusasiirwe (2022) asserts that the colonization of languages remains persistent, marginalizing indigenous and mother tongues in social work practice and education. Therefore, a proper decolonization process requires the institutionalization of indigenous languages reflecting the multi-linguistic and multicultural identity of various ethnic groups, aligned with their philosophies and conceptual frameworks.

How to decolonize social work in Nigeria through structural reformation

Decolonization of social work for effective and efficient practice in Nigeria requires comprehensive social work education. According to Nnama-Okechukwu et al. (2022), social work education can promote social justice by valuing and integrating indigenous knowledge in transmitting knowledge to upcoming social workers. This implies that social work curricula in educational institutions must be adjusted to incorporate ethnic and tribal content that reflects Nigeria's cultural multiplicity.

Most social work curricula and syllabi must reflect traditional concepts for easy assimilation and practice by practitioners, students, and clients. Ugiagbe (2015) suggests that social work educators should promote indigenous knowledge against Eurocentric and Euro-American knowledge, deepening cultural and traditional beliefs among practitioners and clients. An indigenous belief system, such as traditional methods of identifying and punishing thieves, can build African traditional structures of social control, reintroducing pre-colonial crime control methods to contemporary Nigerian society.

Institutionalizing pre-colonial practices can enhance social work, particularly in child protective services and child care systems (Nnama-Okechukwu & Hugh, 2022). Gray and Jacquine (2008) agree that implementing indigenous knowledge in child protective services can enhance foundational worldviews and social work practices in Nigeria. Effective post-colonial social work practice requires the recognition and projection of indigenous theories and models, such as the Ujamaa and Ubuntu models of community development, childcare, family organization, welfare systems, and political organization of Nigerian indigenous people (Evaristus, 2012).

One proposed method for decolonizing social work is projecting indigenous-based theories, models, and approaches. ASWDNET (2021) suggests that applying theories like the African Ubuntu and Ujamaa models in the Nigerian context can enhance decolonization in social work practice and education. The wise philosophies embedded in Nigerian indigenous knowledge and language can strengthen casework, group work, and community development. Effective educators and practitioners must understand basic terminologies in vernacular languages, particularly given Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-racial context.

Conclusion

Contemporary social work practice in Nigeria is constrained by colonial methodologies and theories that disregard pre-colonial social work perspectives. Effective and efficient social work practice requires decolonization, replacing or contextualizing colonial concepts within

indigenous paradigms. This research has explored Eurocentric and Euro-American philosophies in social work education and practice in Nigeria, highlighting the need to institutionalize indigenous concepts of childcare, family, school social work, community development, and models like Ubuntu and Ujamaa to suit Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-racial nature.

Recommendations

1. **Harmonize social work codes:** The Nigerian Association of Social Workers (NASOW) should aggregate and harmonize social work codes of conduct and ethics to reflect indigenous knowledge and approaches, enhancing participation, learning, and teaching in Nigeria.
2. **Promote indigenous models:** Social work practice should be grounded in models and theories that elicit indigenous understanding of concepts, values, and ethics. Promoting traditional models like Ubuntu and Ujamaa will help decolonize social work practice in Nigeria.
3. **Re-engineer pre-colonial concepts:** There is a need to scientifically develop pre-colonial social work concepts, ensuring traditional values are respected within child care systems, community development, and casework.
4. **Institutionalize traditional institutions:** Traditional institutions and religious bodies providing human services should be recognized and institutionalized for effective social work practice in post-colonial Nigeria.
5. **Push for enabling laws:** NASOW should advocate for laws, methodologies, and research that are indigenous, driving effective and efficient social work practice free from colonial influence in Nigeria.

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