

Establishing Civic Virtues in Practice: Their Prevalence in Contemporary Zambian Society

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ABSTRACT

Civic virtues include behaviours such as civic engagement, social responsibility, and altruism, which are vital for democratic participation (Onyx & Bullen, 2016). The purpose of this study was to investigate the presence of civic virtues in Zambian society, particularly in Lusaka's Kanyama and Mandevu communities, using a qualitative approach. The research employed an exploratory case study design and purposive sampling to select a study sample of 25 participants until saturation was achieved. The data was analysed thematically, based on themes and subthemes that emerged. The results showed that Civic virtues like trust and empathy are valued but often undermined by corruption and individualism. While communities offer strong examples of cooperation, practising these virtues was challenged by conservative societal norms that marginalise progressive values. Strengthening civic life requires structural change and inclusive engagement. Other implications are discussed.

Key terms: civic virtues, democratic participation, altruism, behaviours

INTRODUCTION

Civic virtues are the moral and ethical qualities that citizens are expected to embody to uphold and improve their community's moral standards and social unity. They include traits such as respect, responsibility, fairness, and a dedication to the common good, which together promote democratic involvement and reinforce community ties (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler et al. 2008). Bellah et al. (2008) state that civic virtues are vital for the functioning of a robust democracy. They contend that for societies to foster social capital and civic participation, individuals must develop a sense of responsibility and dedication not only to themselves but also to their communities and fellow citizens. The growth of these virtues strengthens social cohesion and motivates individuals to actively engage in civic life, thereby cultivating a resilient and involved society.

In the Zambian context, civic virtue includes various elements that support the well-being and progress of society. According to Kafukulu (2018), civic virtues in Zambia involve respect for authority, community solidarity, and participation in volunteer activities. Additionally, Simutanyi (2015) emphasises the importance of social cohesion, tolerance, and respect for diversity as vital parts of civic virtue in Zambia's multicultural society. These civic virtues are influenced by Zambia's cultural, historical, and socio-economic background, embodying a range of settled dispositions that reflect the moral qualities needed for positive contributions to societal well-being and governance. Essentially, civic virtues can be seen as the character traits that define a good citizen, including but not limited to responsibility, respect, empathy, and active involvement in civic life (Lovett, 2015). As members of society navigate the complexities of civic life, these virtues not only guide individual behaviour but also shape collective social norms and values. Developing civic virtues is crucial for encouraging civic engagement, fostering social cohesion, and maintaining healthy democratic institutions. Through the perspective of civic virtue, citizens are urged to prioritise the common good, participate in public discourse, and engage meaningfully in the democratic process. This understanding of civic virtue forms a key foundation for cultivating active and informed citizens who contribute to the vitality and resilience of their communities.

Studies have demonstrated that integrating civic virtues into Zambian society involves fostering a culture of active citizenship, social cohesion, and community solidarity (Simutanyi, 2015). According to Kafukulu (2018), this integration includes promoting volunteerism, respect for authority, and environmental stewardship (Chinsinga, 2016).

Civic virtues form the foundation of a cohesive society. They are vital for fostering a democratic environment, where citizens actively participate in civic duties that uphold community and national resilience. In Zambia, as in many developing countries, the focus on civic education in formal schooling often neglects the broader socio-cultural contexts in which these virtues are practised and developed. Research shows that civic virtues go beyond the classroom and are nurtured through community participation, family practices, and informal learning settings (Putnam, 2000; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995).

In Zambia, the expectation of active civic participation and the realisation of civic virtues are often hampered by socio-economic challenges, political disillusionment, and a lack of comprehensive civic education, along with a community-based civic virtue framework. Despite the formal education system's curriculum including elements of civic responsibility, many citizens, particularly youths, show a disconnect between formal civic training and actual civic engagement. This gap is apparent in low voter turnout, limited involvement in local governance, and a widespread sense of apathy towards community issues (Bishop & Mkwanda, 2020; Mwanakatwe, 2016).

Existing research has mainly concentrated on the part of formal education in fostering civic virtue, often overlooking the wider, community-level factors that significantly influence civic identities (Putnam, 2000). This oversight creates an urgent need to investigate how citizens engage with and nurture civic virtues outside the education system, particularly in communities such as Kanyama and Mandevu. Ignoring these dynamics risks perpetuating a cycle of disengagement, which can ultimately weaken democratic values and social cohesion.

Furthermore, Kanyama and Mandevu are urban, high-density areas with well-documented social challenges such as unemployment, poor infrastructure, crime, and political clientelism, making them rich sites for studying civic behaviour in contexts of marginalisation. It is worth noting that Kanyama and Mandevu constituencies face numerous challenges related to civic engagement, social cohesion, and community development, which are attributed to a lack of civic virtues among community members (Elections and Governance Report, 2021). Civic engagement, in terms of voter turnout, was low in Kanyama and Mandevu in 2021 at 56% and 59% respectively (ECZ, 2021).

This study examines communities in Zambia that exemplify good practices in incorporating civic virtues into everyday life. Through interviews, focus groups, and community observations, the study identifies the foundational civic virtues that enable these communities to promote civic engagement among their members.

Communitarianism Theory

In the context of the study, communitarian theory provided insights into how community dynamics and social relationships influenced the adoption and practice of civic virtues. By recognising the importance of community and shared values, researchers can better understand how to promote social cohesion and integrate civic virtues in diverse communities (Bell, 2000). In order to have a depth of insights into the Communitarian theory, republicanism was brought to the fore. Various principles, such as Community Engagement, Common Good, and Cultural Identity, can inform strategies for promoting collective responsibility, social harmony, and inclusive development, which are essential for fostering a sense of community and promoting the common good. Communitarian and Civic republicanism have a lot of similarities when it comes to the integration of civic virtues in the Zambian society. Community and social responsibility are one of fundamental similarities as both theories put emphasis on collective responsibility in order to foster the ideals of a society that is anchored on shared societal values. Democratic participation is one other virtue that republicanism dwells on so as to complement the communitarian theory, as both emphasise communities to participate in the community through the principle of collective responsibility and taking part in democratic governance through voting and community work through volunteerism.

Applicability of Communitarian Theory to the Study

Communitarian theory offers a valuable framework for understanding the complex relationships between community, social relationships, and civic virtues. By applying this theory, the researcher will gain a deeper understanding of how community dynamics and social relationships shape individual behavior and promote civic engagement. Communitarian theory emphasises the importance of community and social relationships in shaping personal identity, values, and behaviours, which may help the researcher understand how civic virtues are adopted and practised in the Kanyama and Mandevu constituencies.

The applicability of communitarian theory to this study lies in its ability to inform strategies for promoting social cohesion and integrating civic virtues in diverse communities. By recognizing the importance of community and shared values, researchers will develop effective approaches to promote collective responsibility and social harmony. Communitarian theory's focus on social responsibility can also encourage individuals to take an active role in promoting civic virtues and contributing to the well-being of their communities. Furthermore, by empowering community members to become agents of change, communitarian theory will help researchers develop sustainable and community-driven solutions for promoting civic virtues.

In terms of methodology, communitarian theory's emphasis on community dynamics and social relationships suggests the use of qualitative research methods, such as focus groups, interviews, and observations, to gather rich and nuanced data. Community-based participatory research approaches, which involve community members in the research process and promote collaborative problem-solving, can also be effective in this context. By adopting a qualitative and participatory approach, the researchers gained a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between community, social relationships, and civic virtues in Kanyama and Mandevu constituencies.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research approach and an exploratory case study design to investigate the current state of civic virtues in Zambian societies, specifically within the Kanyama and Mandevu communities. Qualitative studies focus on capturing and describing lived experiences of a group of people. This method aims to explore individuals' experiences, perceptions, and the meanings they assign to a particular phenomenon, such as the state of civic virtues (Cresswell, 2018).

Furthermore, an exploratory case study design facilitates the usual collection of data via in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

Written descriptions and data will be analysed thematically. This exploratory case study design employs purposive sampling. Participants will be chosen based on their experiences with the phenomenon under investigation. Sample sizes in descriptive phenomenology are generally small, ranging from 3 to 25 participants (Creswell, 2018). Therefore, the study sample consisted of 10 participants (subject to reaching sample saturation within the communities), which aligns with the scope of an exploratory case study. In this context, an exploratory case study research design enabled a comprehensive understanding of the current state of civic virtues in Zambian societies.

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who are likely to offer valuable insights. The researcher identifies various individuals with expertise to create an environment that fosters a comprehensive understanding of the current state of civic virtues in Zambian societies. Primary data was collected through focus group discussions and oral interviews using an interview guide. These tools facilitated the researcher in gathering primary data.

Data was coded and analysed thematically. The researcher identified and examined the underlying themes and patterns within the data, reporting these findings clearly and concisely. This allowed the researcher to draw well-informed conclusions based on a deeper understanding of the data's meanings and significance. Themes that emerged from this study were used to draw conclusions from each finding.

The researcher ensured trustworthiness by addressing four criteria: (i) credibility (a measure of the truth value of qualitative research), (ii) transferability (the extent to which findings are useful in other settings), (iii) dependability (the degree of consistency), and (iv) conformability (producing findings that objectively reflect data collected from participants).

Participants' privacy was maintained at all times. In data analysis, the names of the involved communities and study participants were not disclosed to safeguard their dignity and reputation. Informed consent was also secured from participants in a language they understood, whether in writing, verbally, or by their participation. Additionally, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant authorities.

RESULTS

Emerging Core Themes and Structural Descriptions

The analysis of interview transcripts, focus group discussions and institutional documents yielded three primary themes, directly corresponding to the core tenets of the establishment of civic virtues in the Zambian society as summarized in Table 3.1 below:

Focus Group Discussion Results Table

THEME	STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTION (ESSENCE)	REPRESENTATIVE QUOTE
1. Manifestation of civic virtues	Emphasis was placed on the belief that virtues exist through values such as respect, responsibility and patriotism	"We understand that Civic virtues is about promoting the common good and working towards the development of the Country."
2. Examples of Civic virtues	Various examples of civic virtues were given as respect for human rights, tolerance, inclusivity, accountability and honesty.	We've observed that civic virtues were essential for promoting social cohesion and community unity.
3. Challenges in Practising Civic Virtues	Emphasis was placed on the challenges in practising Civic virtues such as corruption, inequality and social injustice, lack of awareness and limited access to information.	We face challenges in staying motivated and committed to practising civic virtues, and in finding support and resources to practice civic virtues

Results From The Interviews

THEME	STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTION (ESSENCE)	REPRESENTATIVE QUOTE
1. State of civic virtues	Civic virtues were valued but often compromised by self-interest, corruption and lack of accountability.	"I think civic virtues are declining in our society due to the emphasis on individualism and greed."
2. Examples of Civic virtues	The main examples of civic virtues given by participants were trust, cooperation, and empathy were prevalent in the communities.	"One of the things that stands out to me is the trust that's developed between neighbours. We've had instances where someone's lost a pet, and the whole neighbourhood comes together to help find it. It's amazing to see how we all look out for each other."
3. Challenges in Practising Civic Virtues	Emphasis was placed on the challenges in practising Civic virtues, such conservative and heteronormative nature of the society.	"One major obstacle was the conservative and heteronormative nature of the society, which led to feminist values being discredited by accusations of being "Western" or linked to "taboo" issues like non-heterosexuality."

DISCUSSION

The findings from the focus group discussions (FGDs) and the interviews conducted reveal a nuanced understanding of civic virtues among participants, highlighting both their perceived importance and the challenges associated with their practice. Three key themes emerged: the manifestation of civic virtues, examples of civic virtues, and the challenges in practising them.

Manifestation of Civic Virtues

Participants consistently emphasized that civic virtues are deeply rooted in values such as respect, responsibility, and patriotism. These values were seen not merely as abstract ideals but as actionable principles that guide behaviour toward the common good. The representative quote, “We understand that Civic virtues are about promoting the common good and working towards the development of the Country,” underscores a collective orientation toward national progress and social responsibility. This aligns with existing literature that frames civic virtues as foundational to democratic engagement and societal well-being (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler et al. 2008). Bellah et al. (2008) state that civic virtues are vital for the functioning of a robust democracy. According to Simutanyi (2015), Studies have demonstrated that integrating civic virtues into Zambian society involves fostering a culture of active citizenship, social cohesion, and community solidarity. The result equally aligns with the theory of Communitarianism used in the study, because communitarian theory focuses on social responsibility and also encourages individuals to take an active role in promoting civic virtues and contributing to the well-being of their communities.

Examples of Civic Virtues

The FGDs provided a rich array of examples that illustrate the practical dimensions of civic virtues. These included respect for human rights, tolerance, inclusivity, accountability, and honesty. Participants viewed these virtues as essential for fostering social cohesion and community unity. The emphasis on inclusivity and tolerance reflects a growing awareness of the need for pluralism in civic life, especially in diverse societies. Moreover, the mention of accountability and honesty suggests a desire for ethical governance and transparent public service, reinforcing the role of civic virtues in strengthening democratic institutions. Other scholars agree with these examples of Civic Virtues like Putnam (2000) Verba, Schlozman, & Brady (1995), who purported that Civic Virtues are nurtured through community participation, family practices, and informal learning settings. The views of Putnam (2000) are very much in line with this study as he outlines civic virtues such as trust, civic participation and reciprocity in community activities. On the other hand, Robert Bellah posits views of civic virtues like responsibility and public good which are very much in line with the communitarianism theory which has anchored this study. Further, both theories emphasise on the importance of community and social bonds. They both emphasise on civic participation and responsibility which is exhibited in civic engagement.

Challenges in Practising Civic Virtues

Despite the positive outlook on civic virtues, participants acknowledged significant barriers to their consistent practice. These included systemic issues such as corruption, inequality, and social injustice, as well as individual-level constraints like a lack of awareness and limited access to information. One participant noted, “We face challenges in staying motivated and committed to practising civic virtues and in finding support and resources to practice civic virtues,” highlighting the emotional and logistical difficulties involved. These challenges are not new, as they are supported by sentiments from scholars like Bishop & Mkwanda (2020); Mwanakatwe (2016), who highlighted limited involvement in local governance and a widespread sense of apathy towards community issues. These challenges suggest that while civic virtues are valued, their enactment requires supportive structures, education, and institutional accountability.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals a complex and nuanced landscape of civic virtues within contemporary society. While participants consistently affirmed the importance of civic virtues such as trust, cooperation, and empathy, their practice was often undermined by systemic issues, including corruption, individualism, and lack of accountability. The tension between valuing civic ideals and confronting societal realities underscores a broader moral ambivalence.

Moreover, the challenges in practising civic virtues were deeply rooted in cultural and ideological structures. The conservative and heteronormative nature of the society not only constrained inclusive civic engagement but also marginalized feminist and progressive values, framing them as foreign or taboo. These findings suggest that civic virtue is not merely a personal ethic but a contested social construct shaped by power, identity, and cultural narratives.

Fostering civic virtues requires more than individual goodwill; it demands structural transformation, inclusive dialogue, and a reimagining of communal responsibility. Future research should explore strategies for cultivating civic virtues in pluralistic societies, especially those grappling with ideological rigidity and social fragmentation.

IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings suggest that civic education should not only promote awareness of civic virtues but also address the structural impediments that hinder their practice. Interventions aimed at reducing corruption, promoting equity, and enhancing access to civic information could empower individuals to embody these virtues more fully. Furthermore, fostering community-based initiatives that reinforce civic values may help sustain motivation and collective engagement.

There are several practical recommendations for this study to integrate civic virtues education into community programs and local governance. Citizens or local community members should be involved when the leaders are making decisions that affect them. For instance, the local people should get involved in the budgeting process so that civic virtues programmes can be incorporated. There should be consistent dialogue meetings between local people and those in policy-making and decision-making offices. There should be an enabling environment for smooth citizen engagement. There should be a deliberative move to integrate service-learning projects that reflect community service and civic engagement.

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Declaration of Interest

None of the authors declared any conflicting interest.

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