DIOGENES

Ubuntu

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Introduction

'There can thus be no genuinely global ethic until non-Africans start taking the rich and immensely long-standing ethical heritage of black Africa seriously. Not only is this an obvious requirement for simple, geographical completeness, it is even more essential for ethical depth' (Prozesky 2009: 3). These are the words I have quoted from Martin Prozesky in his introductory chapter in an anthology called *African Ethics* (Murove 2009). For many years, African ethics has been marginalized in the mainstream ethical discourses. Some western scholars have gone to the far extreme of claiming that there is no ethics in Africa. A discussion on the ethics or philosophy of Ubuntu is usually suspected by other western scholars for being another way of African scholars advancing their own hidden agendas against the values or philosophies they received from the western world. Whilst Ubuntu has originated with African societies in time immemorial, there is a tendency among scholars to trivialize this truism. For example, one finds a Dutch anthropologist by the name of Wim van Binsbergen trivializing the concept of Ubuntu when he said,

> The concept's utopian and prophetic nature is recognized. This allows the author to see a considerable positive application for the concept at the centre of the globalised, urban societies of Southern Africa today. *Ubuntu* philosophy is argued to constitute not a straight-forward *emic* rendering of a pre-existing African philosophy available since times immemorial in the various languages belonging to the Bantu language family. Instead, *ubuntu* philosophy is a remote *etic* reconstruction, in an alien globalised format, of a set of implied ideas that do inform aspects of village and kin relations in many contexts in contemporary Southern Africa. (van Binsbergen 2001: 1)

The problem of Ubuntu is that it has many meanings that are inexhaustible because this ethic or philosophy cannot be pinned down to have originated at a particular point in time in human history. As the name suggests, it originated with African people (Bantu) as part and parcel of their cosmology and the implied individual ontology. To reduce Ubuntu to 'a remote *etic* reconstruction' is dubious to say the least. The salient presumption in van Binsbergen's reasoning is based on the popular western prejudice that Africa has nothing offer to the world in terms of philosophy and values. On the other hand, Prozesky is of the view that a real global ethic that deserves such a name has to take into account seriously the rich ethical traditions of black people. This is an interesting

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debate which goes beyond the scope of this article. In this article I shall restrict myself on the ethic of Ubuntu and what I think would be its contribution to the generality of human existence.

The argument I am making in this paper is that the efficacy of Ubuntu which lies on the primacy that is given to relational rationality – the original understanding of a human being as a relational being does challenge the contemporary individualistic and self-interested understanding of a human being which has tragically dominated our academic understanding of a human being. In support of this claim, the article will go on to show that the African ethical concept of Ubuntu has a tremendous contribution to make to a new understanding of a human being as originally a being in relations. Since Ubuntu is based on a worldview of relationality, its main insight is consequently based on the idea that as human beings we depend on other human beings to attain ultimate well-being. It has been often observed by many a scholar that it is the reality of our dependence and interdependence with each other that we attain the fullest of our humanness. Consequently, the definition of Ubuntu as humanness is dovetailed by this presumption – namely that humanness is our existential precondition of our bondedness with others.

In the light of the observation that humanness is our existential precondition of our bondedness with others, there are also other derivatives that arise from such an assertion. Here what comes to mind is a truism that our humanness is mediated by other immediate factors in our existence. These mediatory factors enable us to exist within a perpetual state of symbiosis with others in the past, present, and future. To illustrate what I am saying here, my contemporary existence has been enabled by those who existed in the past, hence I shall also influence the future when I join my ancestors through death. This conceptualization of human existence is at the heart of the ethic of Ubuntu. Within the limited scope of this article, I do not intend to go into a detailed grammatical discussion on the semantics of Ubuntu, but rather to give a general picture of the ethic of Ubuntu with specific reference to its various ethical implications to human existence.

This article is divided into three sections. The first section aims at showing that the ethic of Ubuntu can be understood best within the sub-Saharan African experience of dehumanization under colonialism and apartheid. It is thus demonstrated that the ethic of Ubuntu was the antithesis of the colonial dehumanization as this ethic was evoked as the antithesis of the then dehumanizing colonial condition. In the second section my aim is to show that Ubuntu is part and parcel of the post-colonial quest for a rebirth of an African identity. Lastly I shall demonstrate that Ubuntu has some far reaching cosmological implications that in fact echo those that are espoused in the theory of relativity, especially in the light of predominance that is given to relationality.

Ubuntu and the sub-Saharan African experience of dehumanization

The ethic of Ubuntu is a humanistic ethic which in its articulation was aimed at countering a behaviour that was considered as dehumanizing. Ubuntu means humanness – treating other people with kindness, compassion, respect and care. These virtues are usually referred to as the summation of Ubuntu or *humanness*. Ubuntu is well captured in the adage which says *Umuntu ngomuntu ngabantu* (Zulu) – a person is a person because of other persons. Hence, failure to act humanely towards other people is thus considered as a lack of humanness or lack of Ubuntu. This follows that someone who lacked Ubuntu could not be considered as a human being. The word *umuntu* (Zulu/Ndebele) or *munhu* (Shona) means a person or a human being. But this word evolved a peculiar connotation during colonialism in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, Stanlake and Tommie Samkange made the following observation on Ubuntu during colonialism:

> We know also, it [Ubuntu] means more than just a person, human being or humanness because when one sees two people, one white and the other black, coming along, we say, '*Hona munhu uyo ari kufamba nomurungu*' or in isiNdebele, *'Nanguyana umuntu ohamba lo mlungu'* (There is a muntu/munhu walking with a white man). Now, is there a sense in which we can say a white man lacks something which we always identify in an Africa? Yes, black Americans, for instance, identify something they call 'soul' as being almost exclusively among black folk. …Why? Perhaps because of the unique experience the black American has had passing through a particular brand of slavery: North American slavery (Samkange and Samkange 1980: 38–39).

Whilst Ubuntu might have been taken for granted in precolonial and preslavery African societies, there is no doubt that the discourse of this ethic co-evolved with colonialism and slavery. The behaviour of slavery masters and colonial settlers towards their African victims was devoid of humanness or Ubuntu because Ubuntu implies seeing another human being as yourself and treating them with respect. Here I should like to turn our attention to the definition of Ubuntu which is given by Samkange & Samkange. These authors defined Ubuntu as 'The attention one human being gives to another: the kindness, courtesy, consideration and friendliness in the relationship between people; a code of behaviour, an attitude to other people and to life, is embodied in hunhu or ubuntu' (Samkange & Samkange 1980: 39). In the light of this definition it shall be shown in the following discussion that the African revolt against colonialism and slavery was based on the conviction that such brutal systems were the antithesis of Ubuntu because they were systems of ultimate dehumanization to the Africans. For example, during the colonial epoch in Southern Africa, Africans were forcibly removed from their original communities and driven to areas which were called Native Reserves. Equally wild animals were driven from their habitats and enclosed into areas that were also called Game Reserves. Here it is important to take note of the fact that both Africans and wild animals were now considered to share a Reserve as a common habitat. But the colonialists encounter with a people who understood themselves as existing collectively under an ethic that gave primacy to an ethic of Ubuntu could have been a maddening experience. Ania Loomba puts it correctly when she said: 'The individual European faces the alien hordes, and if he identified with them, if he transgresses the boundary between "self" and "other", he regresses into primitive behaviour, into madness…there was a great concern to describe and pathologise Africans in general in order to then define the European as inherently different' (Loomba 1998: 137–138; see Murove 1999: 47).

The ethic of Ubuntu was denigrated by colonial scholarship as an ethic that was mainly a phenomenon of human primitivity, as an expression of infantile behaviour, and equally a manifestation of an infliction of dependency complex syndrome. The conviction amongst colonial scholars who were too excited and intoxicated by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution was based on the idea that communal ethic and communal existence was nothing else but an expression of primitivism which ought to be conquered by an ethic of individualism which has been the main reason behind the rise of western civilization. Basil Davidson puts it explicitly when he says that '…the nature of African civilization supposed a notion of community that was restrictive to change in certain decisive ways. Within them, the difference between good and bad lay in acceptance and rejection of the mandatory precedence – everyday, practical, all-pervasive – of what had come to seem the 'right and natural'. From this followed their inhibitive conservatism' (Davidson 1969: 69). The influence of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution to colonial anthropology led to the trivialization of African communalism as it was enshrined in the ethic of Ubuntu. To some of these scholars the ethic of Ubuntu was vehemently attacked on the grounds that it was a recipe for retarding modernization and the benefits that are associated with it. Stephen Theron expressed his distaste of Ubuntu on the grounds that it was a recipe for underdevelopment and recipe of society populated by individuals

who are barren of a sense of personal responsibility. He chastised those scholars who advocated Ubuntu as follows:

> As for the ethical implications, the proverb [Ubuntu] simply side-steps the slow Western development of the idea of personal responsibility, charted in the Bible and elsewhere, and now known to Africans. Without this consciousness the fruits of technology cannot be enjoyed. …The proverb teaches Africans to evade responsibility, rather, to hide behind the collective decision of the tribe. (Theron 1995: 35)

It is important to take cognizance of the fact that Ubuntu is condemned on what I see as frivolous grounds such as personal responsibility and the Bible. These are frivolous grounds on the premise that a proper understanding of responsibility presumes that as individuals we always respond to what we find in relationships, and if there are no relationships there cannot be anything like personal responsibility. A proper understanding of personal responsibility can only be that which is based on being sensitized to one's embeddedness to relationship with others. In the ethic of Ubuntu, responsibility is connected to the idea that the individual is morally accountable to others. Josephy Huber puts it well when he described responsibility as a universal duty we owe to each other: 'Not many of us will ever be completely self-sufficient and all sufficient. Common sense tells us not only to accept help but also to lend a helping hand when needed. Rabindranath Tagore remarked, "Life finds its wealth by the claims of the world and its worth by the claims of love"' (Huber 1984: 114–115). Within such an understanding of responsibility we can deduce that people can only be responsible within the context of relationships with others. In the ethic of Ubuntu, the existence of others in community provides the individual with the fertile context in which to exercise their responsibility. A responsible person is thus characterized as *Unobuntu* (Zulu) or *Unohunhu* (Shona) – terms that imply that s/he has humanness or that s/he is a true embodiment of what it really means to be human. The attainment of humanness is regarded as the primary responsibility of the family and the surrounding community. On this point Michael Gelfand (1973: 57) cannot be bettered when he claimed that, 'Unhu is derived from the parents, from tribal practices and inheritance from the distant past. The parents teach their children Unhu. The good man[sic] has Unhu. He welcomes visitors to his home where he receives them in the correct way due to the particular visitor.'

In Ubuntu the meaning of responsibility is premised on the relationships which the individual has with others in community and not on the idea of individual autonomy. One who has Ubuntu or Unhu takes into consideration the concerns of others in relationship to his personal concerns. This claim could not make sense in colonial social evolutionism because of the predominance that was given to individualism and the pursuit of self-interest in human socio-economic relations. Here the main scholarly economic and political image of human beings was that their relations were always fuelled by greed and that there was no other motivation besides that. This is the philosophical, political and economic image of a human being that was promoted in the writings of Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Bernard de Mandeville up to Adam Smith. The writings of these scholars taught the western world that it was only greed that propelled human beings into action (see Hobbes 1962: 99; Hume 1978: 117–119; Mandeville 1924: 18–36). In other words all human societies came to be understood as having co-evolved with self-interest or greed as the primary motivation. Karl Polanyi refuted this glorification of self-interest as he made an observation to the effect that in African societies 'destitution is impossible: whosoever needs assistance receives it unquestioningly' (Polanyi 1968: 163). Polanyi's evolutionary argument against the ascendency of the universalization of greed in human economic relations was further supported by the observation that in African societies emphasis was on communal solidarity rather than on the pursuit of endless accumulation of wealth by the individual at the expense of the community. He writes:

> It is the absence of the threat of individual starvation which makes primitive society, in a sense, more human than market economy... Ironically, the white man's initial contribution to the black man's [sic] world mainly consisted in introducing him to the uses of the scourge of hunger. Thus the colonists may decide to cut the breadfruit trees down in order to create an artificial food scarcity or may impose a hut tax on the native to force him to barter away his labour. (Polanyi 1968: 164)

In a society which gave primacy to human wellbeing as is the case with the ethic of Ubuntu, where people have an inherent tendency to care for each other, economic relations that thrived on competitive greed could not have existed. An ethic of Ubuntu and the emphasis it puts on care among human beings does logically lead us to the conclusion that the individual's accumulation and consumption of wealth was supposed to be guided by the principle of sufficiency. To give an example, Portuguese traders by the names of Diego and de Couto ventured into the Zambezi valley in the fourteenth century had it in their diaries that the Africans 'are so lazy that they will stop work as soon as they find enough gold to buy two pieces of cloth to dress themselves…[They] have neither eagerness nor greed…as they always rest content with but little' (cited in Mudenge 1988: 171; see Murove 2005: 67–68). What actually mesmerized these early Portuguese traders was the idea of coming across a people who did not believe in the economic relations of endless accumulation. Here we can infer that the economic relations that were inspired by the ethic of Ubuntu were mainly anchored on the principle of sufficiency as the pre-requisite to social equality. Michael Gelfand observed that because of the emphasis which is put on relationality in African societies what is mostly aspired to in these societies is a situation of material equality. Thus he had the following to say in this regard:

> All clansmen are materially equal in their Tribal Trust Lands, since no land can be bought or sold and each man receives just sufficient on which to grow enough food for his family. As all the men [sic] in clan area claim to be brothers, it is important in order to avoid jealousies that no one is more wealthy than the rest. It any man [sic] finds himself in strained circumstances, one of his brothers will help him without expecting payment. …A feeling of peace, brotherhood [and sisterhood] and equality emanates from them. (Gelfand 1981: 15)

According to Gelfand's observation, Ubuntu is based on the idea that material equality rests on the principle of sufficiency. The individual thrives for sufficiency because s/he regards others as brothers and sisters whose needs are to be met in equal measure as one's own. People helped each other on the understanding that the present predicament of the other person is my predicament in the future. In Ubuntu there is a popular adage which says that 'Your child is also my child' – implying that one should not discriminate our common belongingness as we are bonded in this common life. Mluleki Munyaka and Mokgethi Motlhabi (2009: 66–67) cannot be bettered here when they said that '[a] human person's worth as a human being is always considered as great as another's. Ubuntu is averse to anything that is harmful to a human person. It flourishes in respect and honour for others.' It is partly in the light of the above observations that post-colonial African scholars have maintained that an authentic reconstruction or rebirth of an African society has to be based on the ethic of Ubuntu. These scholars argue that this ethic provides an opportunity for a new beginning.

Ubuntu and the post-colonial quest for a rebirth of an African identity

I should like to start this section by asking whether the post-colonial discourse of Ubuntu is also related to the African quest for identity. This question is partly inspired by Ali Mazrui who argued

that there is a tendency among Africans to glorify the past whilst at the same time imitating their yester colonial masters. He writes:

> This revelling in ancient glory is part of the crisis of identity in Africa. When I first visited the United Nations in 1960–1 it was fascinating to listen to some of the new African delegates revelling in the innocence of newly born nationhood. But involved in this very concept of re-birth is a paradoxical desire – the desire to be grey-haired and wrinkled as a nation; of wanting to have an antiquity. This is directly linked to the crisis of identity. (Mazrui 1969: 217–218)

Can the ethic of Ubuntu be connected to the crisis of identity in post-colonial Africa? My answer to this question is an emphatic yes! There are some scholars who have argued that Africa did not have any values, hence all the values she ever had originated from the west through the mediation of colonialism and Christianity. For example, in most of our institutions of higher learning in Africa one hardly finds a module on African ethics. More so, the curriculum itself is extremely Euro centric, and as such these universities have remained the only towering symbols of colonial culture and values in post-colonial African societies. Colonialism used distortion and destruction to achieve total occupation and exploitation. Africa was a passive recipient of colonial values. As a passive recipient of colonial values, whatever values Africa might have owned either disintegrated into nothingness or assumed a certain form to suit the colonial circumstances. In this regard, colonialism was a total disruption of the moral fabric of African life (Murove 1999: 52; Irele 1981: 322–325).

The African experience of colonialism was based on a schism between traditionalism and modernity. Within a traditional setting, that is the villages or communal lands, the African was expected to be a traditionalist whilst in the urban setting s/he was expected to be a modernist – that is adhering to western cultural values and religions. Evidently such a situation distorted the identity of an African. For example, George Kahari noted this distortion of the African identity when he said:

> The missionaries approach to the concept of individualism was systematic as they thought that the only way of changing the values of a group of people was through the individual. The missionary was the first to separate the person from his social group, thus initiating the process of making unique experiences common, a process which also resulted in the person being alienated from his group. Christianity was more appealing to the more adventurous individuals, and for the first time in history parents and their children did not believe in the same God. Secondly, on the intellectual side the minds of the young traditionalists awoke to wider fields of activities. …They were taught arithmetical equations in groups, but the task of finding out the answer was an individual one. They were taught how to write letters, but the application of this exercise to real life situations was personal and individualistic. They did everything together for the purposes of doing things as separate individuals. (Kahari 1982: 87)

This distortion of the African identity in the form of modernity and traditionalism has been a persistent theme in many African novels. Here the persistent motif has been that the African identity has been distorted by colonialism which has brought about a perennial conflict of values between traditionalism and modernity within the African society. The main contributory factor in this conflict is usually laid on the ethic of atomic individualism which is usually seen as connected to the idea of modernity. The doctrine of individualism is also seen as against the ethic of Ubuntu which is at the heart of African ethics. The argument for the reconstruction of an African identity through Ubuntu comes as a critique of atomic individualism which has been central to western ethical philosophical discourses. Within Ubuntu, individualism is seen as an illusion to the reality of our

common belonging. This way of thinking can be discerned in the work of Leopold Senghor when he maintains that the African identity can only be best conceptualized on the basis of relationality with others. Thus, he says,

> The Negro-African sympathises, abandons his or her personality to become identified with the Other. S/he dies to be reborn in the Other. S/he does not assimilate, she is assimilated. S/he lives in common life with the Other; s/he lives in symbiosis… 'I think therefore I am', Descartes writes…The negro-African would say: 'I feel, I dance the Other; I am …' (Senghor 1964: 72–73)

As it is popularly known among scholars, the Cartesian rationality premised the individual's identity on rationality as the main feature that accords uniqueness to the individual. This Cartesian rationality has been seen as representative of modern western individualism which emphasizes the individual's incommunicability and singularity as something indispensable to what it means to be a person (Uzukwu 1996: 42–45). However, the adage *Umuntu ngomuntu ngabantu* ('persons depend on other persons to be persons') radically alters the terrain of the doctrine of individualism because the assumption of this adage is that personhood is derivative from relationship with other persons, hence it is not an incorrigible property of the individual but something that is shared with others and finds nourishment and flourishing in relationships with others. But the uniqueness of Ubuntu is mainly in the fact that community is presumed to be an organic whole because individuals do not come together to form the community, rather their identities are formed by the community. The concept of community is not restricted to human society, it is thus maintained that the idea of community embraces the natural world and the invisible world. In many African cultures a person's identity was predicated on the totemic species thus implying that our human origins and identity are something that is shared with the natural world.

The quest for an African identity through Ubuntu has also influenced the socio-economic policies of many countries in Southern Africa. The main argument that have been put forward by scholars is that capitalistic values remain alien to those of Ubuntu, therefore for capitalism to be domesticated there was a need to make the values of Ubuntu such as caring for others, compassion and creating an environment of mutual belonging would help to bring about a capitalism that is well sensitized to African cultural context. In this vein, Jenny Maree and Lovemore Mbigi (1995: 2) have this to say: 'It is our belief that unless the development structures, strategies and processes can harness these Ubuntu values into a dynamic transformative force for reconstruction and development, failure will be almost certain.' Here the underlying assumption is that business practices in Africa have been mainly dominated by western business values to the exclusion of African values. It is mainly on the basis of this concern that African scholars are arguing that the infusion of Ubuntu values in business will give an African identity to business. It is further argued that

> Business relations are ethically plausible when they enhance the flourishing or ultimate well-being of communities. Human beings are not solely self-interested; rather they are endowed with a propensity to belong in a way that is all embracive. Thus, Ubuntu implies a humane treatment of people where they are not seen as part and parcel of production costs like the machines that are used in production processes. (Murove 2005: 346)

In the light of the above quotation it can be deduced that an identity which will be assumed by business after embracing the ethic of Ubuntu will be that which sees business practices on the basis of human centeredness. In this regard business will be required to realize that its own wellbeing is inseparably conjoined to the wellbeing of the people who work and interact with it. The ethic of Ubuntu also requires that there has to be a humane treatment of people in business practices. This

humane treatment of people is seen as the main element that will give business an African identity.

However, it is not only the sphere of private business which should acquire an identity of Ubuntu, other African governments and scholars have also maintained that the values of Ubuntu should also be infused within the public sector. The main argument they proffer in this regard is that during colonialism and apartheid, the public sector was used for the suppression and dehumanization of people, hence real transformation can come about when the public sector has acquired an identity of Ubuntu. This is the idea that is proffered by John Mafunisa (2008: 117) when he affirmed,

> In rendering services to African communities, public employees should ensure that the fundamental proverbial principles of *Ubuntu* are not violated. Public functionaries should carry out their duties with great care and pay attention to details, so as to foster a spirit of unconditional acceptance and care of the entire person, regardless of the social status of a particular individual or community.

The principles of Ubuntu are thus expected to influence the public sector and implicitly these principles were to influence the identity of the public sector – namely, a human centered public sector. This was crucial when one takes into consideration the fact that public servants were previously used as instruments of repression by colonial governments. During colonialism or apartheid, before someone became a public servant they were expected to be well informed about western culture and values. In this way, public servants were notoriously known for their abuse of African communities. The need to give an African identity to public servants also led to the post-apartheid South African policies that were based on the realization that socio-economic transformation can be genuinely brought about through the active commitment of communities. This policy is known as *Masakhane* – which means mutual constructiveness or building each other. The thrust of this policy is that everybody should participate in the overall socio-economic transformation of the country. Thus *Masakhane* concretizes the reality of our human dependency and interdependence in socio-economic development.

The same Ubuntu inspired developmental theory of *Masakhane* was also reiterated in the South African Public Service Delivery Policy called *Batho Pele* (People first). The main thrust of this policy is that when delivering services to people, government must be sensitized to the needs and ultimate wellbeing of the people it deals with. Within *Batho Pele* one finds that the underlying presumptions are those of Ubuntu. Thus, accordingly, people are not seen as severely self-interested creatures, but as citizens and communities who deserve the best from their own government (http://www.kwazulunatal.gov.za/premier/batho-pele/what-is.htm). It is evidently clear that the primacy that is given to the ethic of Ubuntu as the main source for the restoration of African identity in all spheres of life cannot be overlooked. Here I want to submit that the prominence that is given to Ubuntu arises mainly from the fact that this ethical concept embodies the summit of the good in human conduct. However, it needs to be observed that Ubuntu arises from an African worldview of relatedness and interrelatedness. In this regard, we can say that Ubuntu has other implications that go beyond human conduct. It is for this reason that I shall now turn to what I think to be the cosmological underlying assumptions of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu and its underlying cosmological assumptions

Whilst the ethic of Ubuntu can easily be construed as a purely anthropocentric ethic, there is a certain dimension of it that surpasses anthropocentricism. To demonstrate this, there is a concept

that is closely related to Ubuntu called Ukama. This is a Shona word that means relationships or being related. Grammatically, Ukama is an adjective and its grammatical construction is U – Kama. 'U' is an adjectival prefix and Kama is an adjectival stem. But when taken as the stem, Kama means 'to milk a cow or goat' (Dale 1994: 127; see Murove 1999: 10). Those who are related by blood or by marriage are called Hama. When it is Ukama it becomes an adjective which means being related or belonging to the same family. In Shona culture and other Southern African cultures, Ukama is not usually restricted to people who share the same blood. There is also a tendency where people address each other as blood relatives. This observation was also made by Michael Bourdillon (1976: 34) when he said that '[u]nrelated persons can adopt the terms such as grandfather, cousin, mother-in-law, towards each other to express a friendly relationship, reflecting the typical relationship between mother's brother and sister's son'. Ukama is also based on the totemic system whereby a person sees himself or herself as related to natural species, thereby instilling a sense of belonging to the wider environment, the past as well as the future. After studying the cultural practices of the Buntu peoples of Southern Africa as an anthropologist, Philippe Junod (1938: 112) had this to say: 'Totemism shows well one characteristic of the Bantu mind: the strong tendency to give a human soul to animals, to plants, to nature as such, a tendency which is at the very root of the most beautiful blossoms of poetry, a feeling that there is a community of substance between the various forms of life.' Within the African totemic system there inheres conviction that *umuntu* was not only related to other abantu, s/he was also related to the natural environment.

One also finds that stories about the origins of *umuntu* are always connected to the natural environment. It is not uncommon to hear African people in Southern Africa referring to themselves and their identities as follows: 'we are those who belong to the buffalo, we are those who belong to elephant, we are those who belong to Zambezi river etc.' The implication here is that *umuntu* traces her history of origins to the natural world. Hence the greatest form of respect you can give *umuntu* when greeting him or her is to address him or her by their totem. Ali Mazrui (1994: 175) aptly captured the reason behind this practice very well when he wrote that,

> African civilizations were characterized by the following attributes: no great distinction between the past, the present and the future; no great distinction between the kingdom of God, the animal kingdom and the human kingdom; the crocodile would be a god; no sharp divide between the living and the dead. The pyramids were new residences of pharaohs. Refineries in the tomb were to be enjoyed by the dead.

In the light of Mazrui's observation we can deduce that *umuntu*'s origins had its background in the holistic outlook towards life whereby *umuntu*'s existence was seen as only plausible within the generality of all existence. In this regard, we can say that there was a sense of continuity between *umuntu* and nature. That which is usually abstracted in certain western philosophical categories of thought as belonging to external environment is conceived by *umuntu* as part of herself or himself. The main reason behind this claim comes from the durability which is given to relationships within the generality of existence. For example among the Shona people of Zimbabwe one finds a proverb that says: *ukama hausukwi numvura hukabva* ('Relationships cannot be washed with water and get removed'); another says that *ukama makore hunopfekana* ('Relationships are like clouds; they interpenetrate each other'). The lesson which we can deduce in these two proverbs is that it is relationships or relationality within existence which will always remain permanent. Whilst in Ukama relationality is more generalized, Ubuntu implies the inherent *umuntu*'s appreciation of Ukama. Hence, in Ukama, the *umuntu* inherits Ubuntu. Personhood is thus relationally constituted to such an extent that there cannot be personhood outside Ukama with others (Gelfand 1973: 57; Murove 2009: 322).

However, because of Ukama or relationality, *umuntu*'s existence is continuous through time. A child's life is seen as a prolongation of the life of the grandfather, grandmother or even that of the great-great grandfather and great grandmother. *Umuntu* lives with Ubuntu at present because for the sake of the future. Through Ukama between the present and the past, those who are living now owe their existence to their ancestors (Murove 2009: 321). Living with Ubuntu in the present is not only beneficial to those who are present, rather it is an enormous contribution to the wellbeing of those who will exist in the future. Within this category of thought, a selfish person is regarded as someone who has no Ubuntu because his or her selfish deeds are most likely to compromise the wellbeing of those who will exist in the future. Equally, someone who has absolutely no regard for the reality of harmonious relations with others is most likely to be anti-social.

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The article has shown that the ethic of Ubuntu is a humanistic ethic. Since Ubuntu means humanness – implying the attention which another person gives to another person with an attitude of kindness, courtesy, consideration and respect – these qualities become the summation of humanness. To be a human being implies being someone endowed with these character qualities and treating other people in the light of them. It was also shown that the eras of slavery and colonialism represented an era of dehumanization in the history of African peoples. Such an era constituted the violation of Ubuntu, hence colonizers and slave masters did not have Ubuntu.

I have also shown that the ethic of Ubuntu is denied by some western scholars, especially those who are influenced by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Their argument was that a communal ethic such as that which is espoused by Ubuntu was just an expression of primitivism, hence it could only be overcome by the ethic of individualism. In this line of reasoning I have shown that the ethic of individualism is usually equated to economic progress and technological advancement. I have argued that the predominance of self-interest and greed which is at the heart of the capitalistic ethic of individualism is incompatible with Ubuntu because in Ubuntu emphasis is put on care and a sense of concern for the wellbeing of others as the main ideal which should guide human economic relations. In the light of this observation I went on to show that the ethic of Ubuntu should be seen in the light of the post-colonial quest for identity.

The African post-colonial quest for identity through Ubuntu is based on the observation that African values have been and are still being marginalized since the times of colonialism because there has been a divide between African traditional values and those that came to be called modern values. This divide has perpetuated a distortion of an African identity. The argument for the reconstruction of an African identity through Ubuntu becomes an antithesis of colonial values such as those enshrined in the doctrine of atomic individualism. In the light of Ubuntu, atomic individualism becomes illusion that vitiates the reality of our human common belonging. Consequently, the quest for an African identity through Ubuntu has played a strong influence in socio-economic policies in Southern Africa. Scholars are arguing that values of Ubuntu should be made integral to business practices as well as in the public service.

I ended this chapter by showing that Ubuntu cannot be simply restricted to human conduct, because it arises from an African world-view of relatedness and interrelatedness. In this way I demonstrate that Ubuntu has implications that go beyond human conduct. Its underlying cosmological assumptions are that being ethical implies that as human beings we need to see ourselves as related and interrelated with the natural environment, the present, the past and the future. I have shown that this is possible when considering Ubuntu with a Shona concept of Ukama – a concept that extends human relationality to all spheres of existence.

Funding

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