Ubuntu in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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1. Introduction

In written sources dating back to 1846, Ubuntu has been treated as the moral quality of a human being, as a way of thinking, a philosophy or an ethic, as African humanism, and as a world perspective.

Ubuntu became noteworthy ideationally during times of political upheaval and the demise of racist regimes in Southern Africa. Ubuntu is associated with a political way of thinking or belief system, a contention unequivocally linked to the transformation from White minority rule to Black majority rule, in Zimbabwe and South Africa in particular [1] (p. 34). Of late, the endeavour to recuperate African dignity has been associated frequently with the possibility of an African Renaissance, as propounded especially by South Africa's former President, Thabo Mbeki.

Post-independence leaders in Africa—such as Awolowo, Kaunda, Nkrumah, Nyerere, Senghor and Sekou Toure—postulated a sharp sense of the pragmatic significance of philosophy. Despite the urgencies and demands of postcolonial reconstruction, these post-independence leaders have given diligent consideration and thought to the philosophical bases of their projects. Thus, for example, whereas it may be debatable whether Nkrumah fully grasped the exigencies of the hypothesis-to-praxis relation, there can be no gainsaying his enthusiastic and sincere commitment to the philosophical foundations of postcolonial governance [2] (p. 322).

Sotiris [3] (pp. 96–97), in referring to critical educational theory, contends that such theory adequately expounded and covered inquiries concerning social class. Regarding education as a system which reproduces class divisions, chain of command (hierarchy), and lack of equality, this has been a key factor informing radical critical work on education. Scrutiny of the role of education, and especially higher education, in the reproduction of class relations has been both a theoretical precept and a political tenet in challenges pertaining to access to education, finance, and syllabi. These are challenges that require change and reform in education aimed at undermining the replication of class divisions [3].

Colonialism generally viewed African cultures with disdain. Wiredu [2] contends that, in many post-independence contexts, it was expected of Africans to genuinely reassert their indigenous lifeways and culture. That is, these reassertions were expected to be genuine, and not just cosmetic changes to the national fabric of many African nations. National rebuilding is viewed by many as a socially and culturally esteemed endeavour. For many nations when they gained independence, the path of least resistance was to follow the societal frameworks bequeathed by the colonial powers. These, then, became blemished duplicates of the governance structures of the colonial states. However, the leaders mentioned above had an astute sense of the significance of cultural identity and did not opt for that simple choice. They comprehended that colonial state architectures ought to be inspected and assessed from an Africanist position. Furthermore, they saw that any such inspection and assessment had to be rooted philosophically.

Nkrumah and Nyerere left a heritage of philosophy, although they had divergent approaches in the quest for African authenticity. Nkrumah borrowed unreservedly from the Western way of thinking. He considered himself a non-denominational Christian and a Marxist socialist, and saw no logical inconsistencies in that combination. Nyerere borrowed less, but he too was shaped by Western thinking. He was a committed Catholic who was wary of Marxism. The European influences in the thought of Nkrumah and Nyerere were often at odds with African authenticity, especially since their social philosophies were embraced after considerable thought and reflection. Nyerere contends that the genuine African socialist does not think of one class of men as his brethren and another as his foes [4] (p. 7). The individual does not enter a coalition with the "brethren" for the elimination of the "non-brethren", but sees human beings as belonging to

an extended family. African socialism (Ujamaa) thus is not established upon the basis of class struggle but upon harmony within the extended family.

2. Ubuntu in South Africa

The reference to former African intellectual giants serves to emphasise the present South African turn to an Ubuntu, which shows attributes of previous post-colonial themes of return. The multi-party negotiation process ushered in the promulgation of South Africa's first democratic constitution on 18 November 1993 and led to South Africa's first free and fair election on 27 April 1994. In its postamble, the 1993 Constitution describes itself as "a historic bridge" away from politically sanctioned racial segregation to democracy, human rights, and the like. It also proclaims that, in dealing with the discord and conflict of the past, "there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for Ubuntu but not for victimisation".

Interestingly, the 1996 Constitution does not make any explicit reference to Ubuntu. Still, at least 18 Constitutional Court decisions mention or apply the term, even if they do not explain the rationale for its inclusion in the first place. Lötter [5] states that Ubuntu implies that one becomes an individual through other individuals. Amongst the comparative echoes which emerged during the 2000s was that Ubuntu is the short form of a longer isiXhosa proverb in Southern Africa, namely, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which signifies that a person is an individual only through interactions with other individuals [6]. According to Gade [7], it was between 1993 and 1995 that Ubuntu first became associated with the proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. If Gade is correct, the term and the proverb became closely connected within the space of only a few years.

As in the rest of Africa, themes of return emerged in relation to the end of apartheid in South Africa. It is contended frequently that, in confronting the divisions and hardships of the apartheid period, South African society needs to recover the soul and spirit of Ubuntu, which—as asserted by the Constitutional Court [8]—is expressive of "the deep cultural heritage of the majority of the population". The Constitutional Court has stated further, in *S v Makwanyane and Another* 1995 (6) BCLR 665 (CC) [9], that: it was against the background of the loss of respect for human life and the inherent dignity which attaches to every person that a spontaneous call has arisen among sections of the community for a return to Ubuntu.

It has been claimed regularly that Ubuntu was entrenched in African society prior to the advent of colonialism. Roederer and Moellendorf [10] posit that: The Nguni word Ubuntu represents notions of universal human interdependence, solidarity and communalism which can be traced to small-scale communities in pre-colonial Africa, and which underlie virtually every indigenous African culture.

This understanding of Ubuntu gained ground in South Africa during the 1990s and the term became closely connected to the proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. Was the link between Ubuntu and the proverb drawn because Ubuntu is intrinsic to an interconnectedness that could have been harnessed by government officials, politicians, and others as a weapon against the ideologies of racism and apartheid? Linking Ubuntu with precepts of interconnectedness meant that these precepts gained authenticity (or further authenticity) among Africans, who consider Ubuntu to be acceptable and embedded in their way of life. Nelson Mandela provided his own interpretation of the concept, saying:

> A traveller through a country would stop at a village and he did not have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food and attend him. That is one aspect of Ubuntu, but it will have various aspects. Ubuntu does not mean that people should not address themselves. The question therefore is: are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to be able to improve? (File:Experience Ubuntu.ogg)

In a sense, Mandela's understanding of Ubuntu is notably context specific and deeply rooted in the historical narrative of South Africa's search for reconciliation and equity. Therefore, its understanding needs to be contextualised within the framework of South African history and culture. His definition of the concept encapsulates the fundamental principles of community and interconnectivity. It emphasizes that individuals exist not in isolation but as integral components of a broader societal tapestry in which each individual has a shared responsibility towards the welfare of other members of the community.

For Desmond Tutu, there is harmonious coexistence between Ubuntu and religion, a harmony that is not just a logical construct, but also firmly grounded in his African Christian background. In his view, Ubuntu is the art or virtue of being human; it underscores the significance of mutual respect, dignity, brotherhood, and community in human relations. It

emphasizes the interconnectedness of human beings, where one's humanity is realised through interactions with others. This aspect of Ubuntu aligns with religious teachings. Additionally, Tutu's approach to the concept of Ubuntu is universal. For him, Ubuntu is an inclusive and overarching philosophy that transcends racial, ethnic, gender, religious, and cultural boundaries. Tutu applies the concept in the context of Christianity and deems it as an expression of this divine and universal Ubuntu.

In the history of Islam, the Christian King of Aksum provided refuge to early Muslim immigrants who had fled persecution in Mecca. The King's protection of Muslims during this event aligns with the broader principles of humanity, compassion, and community that are central to Ubuntu. While the concept of Ubuntu as it is understood today may not have existed in the early days of Islam or in the Kingdom of Aksum, there are certainly common underlying principles that emphasise the significance of community, compassion, and the interconnectedness of humanity, which are embodied in the historical actions of the then-king of Abyssinia. The Prophet Muhammad saw the suffering and tribulation some of his followers endured and advised them to seek refuge in Abyssinia, describing it as a land of virtue ruled by a just Christian king, under whom no one was treated unfairly. In a similar vein, while there is no direct Islamic equivalent to Ubuntu, numerous Islamic principles and concepts share similarities with the underlying values of Ubuntu, including, *Ummah* (community), *sadaqah* (charity) and *zakat* (almsgiving), *rahma* (mercy), *Ihsan* (excellence in character) and *sulh* (reconciliation).

Tutu's utilization of Ubuntu in the process of reconciliation and rehabilitation during the post-apartheid era in South Africa has been highly commendable. His approach effectively balances the objectives of healing, rectifying historical imbalances, and repairing fractured relationships. Tutu's methodology serves as a compelling illustration of the transformative potential of Ubuntu, as it advocates for the reintegration of both victims and perpetrators into the community, thereby facilitating forgiveness and reparative actions. In his distinction between retributive justice and restorative justice, he argues that the latter was central to traditional African jurisprudence. As he points out:

> Here the central concern is not retribution or punishment, but in the spirit of Ubuntu, the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships. This kind of justice seeks to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he or she has injured by his or her offence [11].
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> (pp. 51–52)

Hence, Ubuntu is not restricted to a singular, rigid definition but is a dynamic and evolving philosophy that encompasses a spectrum of interpretations, connotations and meanings. Its adaptability allows it to tackle a variety of contemporary issues and challenges. Additionally, this flexibility and eclectic nature imply that its application can vary widely depending on the cultural, social, legal, political and historical context. Consequently, Ubuntu represents a broad set of ideals about human coexistence and community, lending itself to a multitude of interpretations and applications. Regrettably, the South African state failed to imbue these ideals of Ubuntu with real content, opting instead for neo-liberal economic policies which run counter to solidarity, communalism, and universal human interdependence. In particular, through its various organs, the State has conducted itself contrary to its rhetoric and public pronouncements that use Ubuntu and its ideals to pursue a neo-liberal project. In particular, the State's use of force (i.e., the reaction to countrywide service protests from the Mbeki presidency to the present), its interference with the freedom of the press, and its denialism and shifting of blame for its failures.

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