

Ubuntu As The Praxis Of Intercultural Dialogue In The Wake Of COVID- 19

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Abstract—Anything that strifes, undermines, interferes with humanity in the African context, is deemed as that which goes against the Ubuntu worldview. Ubuntu is an African understanding of human life, where we see that our existence is intertwined in the existence of others: "I am because you are, because you are, therefore we are." In the background where the globe has previously been divided in line with ethnic hate, violence, division based on color, race, religion, sex, sex orientation among others, this paper offers the best remedy with Ubuntu as a Praxis of moving forward. With the current COVID-19 pandemic that has struck humanity across the globe, Ubuntu offers an opportunity for a global discourse where we will be able to view and treat humanity with the highest dignity that befits human persons.

Keywords—Ubuntu; Humanity; Inter-Culturalization, COVID- 19

Introduction

During the era of struggle for independence, ubuntu was increasingly described as an African, humanist philosophy. Ubuntu in this sense is a way of thinking about what it means to be human, and how we, as humans, should behave towards others.

In this paper, I will give the meaning of the word Ubuntu, how it is understood from the Bantu language and its philosophical meaning. I will go ahead to give a brief instances how Ubuntu was once demonstrated by the South African icon, Nelson Madiba Mandela and Retired Archbishop Desmond Tutu in uniting a country- South Africa, which was once bitterly torn by apartheid.

I will then discuss how the globe has experienced violence and strife and how the globe is fast turning into a global village therefore the need for inculturation. I will then discuss the corona pandemic and how it has destabilized the world. I will then conclude by giving my recommendations on the need to inculcate Ubuntu in our cultures for a better world.

Definition of Ubuntu

The term *Ubuntu/Botho/Hunhu* is a Zulu/Xhosa/Ndebele/Sesotho/Shona word referring to the moral attribute of a person, who is known in the Bantu languages as *Munhu* (among the Shona of

Zimbabwe), *Umuntu* (among the Ndebele of Zimbabwe and the Zulu/Xhosa of South Africa), *Muthu* (among the Tswana of Botswana), and *Omundu* (among the Herero of Namibia), just to name a few of the Bantu tribal groupings. Though the term has a wider linguistic rendering in almost all the Bantu languages.

Thus, as an aspect of African traditional philosophy, *Hunhu/Ubuntu* prides in the idea that the benefits and burdens of the community must be shared in such a way that no one is prejudiced. Rather, everything is done to put the interests of the community ahead of the interests of the individual. To this end, the traditional philosophical meaning of the term *Hunhu/Ubuntu/Botho* is sought and its importance in the academy is highlighted and explained. This vantage point looks at how the concept is deployed in the public sphere as well. It also gives an elaborate analysis of the qualities/features of *Hunhu/Ubuntu* as exemplified by John S Pobee's expression: *Cognatus ergo sum* which means *I am related by blood therefore I exist* (Pobee, 1979)

Hunhu/Ubuntu also says something about the character and conduct of a person (Samkange and Samkange 1980: 38). What this translates to is that *Hunhu/Ubuntu* is not only an ontological and epistemological concept; it is also an ethical concept. For Battle, *Ubuntu* is the interdependence of persons for the exercise, development, and fulfilment of their potential to be both individuals and community (2009). Desmond Tutu captures this aptly when he uses the Xhosa proverb, *ungamntu ngabanye abantu*, whose Shona equivalence is *munhu unoitwa munhu nevamwe vanhu* (a person is made a person by other persons). For Gade, this proverb means that each individual's humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others. Onyebuchi Eze (2008) argues in support of Gade when he says:

More critical is the understanding of a person as located in a community where being a person is to be in a dialogical relationship in this community. A person's humanity is dependent on the appreciation, preservation and affirmation of other person's humanity. To be a person is to recognize therefore that my subjectivity is in part constituted by other persons with whom I share the social world.

In regard to the proverbial character of *Ubuntu*, Ramose remarks that, "*Ubuntu* is also consistent with the practices of African peoples as expressed in the proverbs and aphorisms of certain Nguni languages, specifically Zulu and Sotho" (Ramose quoted in van Niekerk 2013).

In his definition of *Ubuntu*, Metz (2007) follows Tutu and Ramose when he equates *Ubuntu* with the idea of humanness and to the maxim *a person is a person through other persons*. This maxim for Metz "has descriptive senses to the effect that one's identity as a human being causally and even metaphysically depends on a community." With this submission, Metz agrees with Ramose, Samkange and Samkange, and Gade that *Ubuntu* is about the group/community more than it is about the self.

Ubuntu is correct behavior, but correct in this sense is defined by a person's relations with other people. *Ubuntu* refers to behaving well towards others or acting in ways that benefit the community. Such acts could be as simple as helping a stranger in need, or much more complex ways of relating with others. A person who behaves in these ways *has ubuntu*. He or she is a full person.

For some, *Ubuntu* is something akin to a soul force—an actual metaphysical connection shared between people and which helps us connect to each other. *Ubuntu* will push one toward selfless acts.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu famously described *ubuntu* as meaning "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours." In the 1960s and early 70s, several intellectuals and nationalists referred to *ubuntu* when they argued that an Africanization of politics and society would mean a greater sense of communalism and socialism

In the 1990s, people began to describe *ubuntu* increasingly in terms of the Nguni proverb translated as "a person is a person through other persons." Christian Gade has speculated that the sense of connectedness appealed to South Africans as they turned away from the separation of Apartheid.

Ubuntu also referred to the need for forgiveness and reconciliation rather than vengeance. It was an underlying concept in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the writings of Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu raised awareness of the term outside of Africa.

Mandela and Tutu on Ubuntu

Many revolutionary movements resort to violence when grievances are not addressed and harms are not redressed. When all other avenues for access to justice are foreclosed; when people cannot turn to courts of law and expect access to justice; when laws are unjust and unfair or just racist; when people are discriminated against and denied dignity—the result often is violent conflict. It would not have been unreasonable to expect many in South Africa to want

to take up arms to engage in violence and to seek vengeance for the suffering they experienced.

Contrary to popular belief, Mandela did not put down *all* weapons to bring about a peaceful transition to democracy (Metz, 2013). Rather he picked up a different one. Mandela is credited with having said: "Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world." Mandela's life is a lesson in *Ubuntu*. He taught that: "No one is born hating another person for the color of his skin or his background or religion. People must learn to hate and if they can learn to hate they can be taught to love for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

Nelson Mandela believed that *Ubuntu* was a way of being which socialized people to see and recognise humanness in other people. It was not a religious phenomenon but a spiritual concept which made people embrace one another with kindness and empathy. Mandela's actions in sacrificing his life for the liberation of African people were a real manifestation of *Ubuntu*.

Mandela's life was an example of how all humans could practice humanity and kindness. Part of embracing one another was opening our spaces to others. We all have a sphere of influence, no matter how big or small. To what extent are we opening this sphere to include others? Mandela admonished us all to appreciate that: "To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."

Desmond Mpilo Tutu is well known for having invoked an *Ubuntu* ethic to evaluate South African society, and he can take substantial credit for having made the term familiar to politicians, activists and scholars around the world (Ramose, 2013). Tutu criticized the National Party, which formalized apartheid, and its supporters for having prized discord, the opposite of harmony.

Apartheid not only prevented "races" from identifying with each other or exhibiting solidarity with one another. It went further by having one "race" subordinate and harm others. In Tutu's words, apartheid made people "less people" for their failure to participate on an evenhanded basis and to share power, wealth, land, opportunities and even themselves.

One of Tutu's more striking, contested claims is that apartheid damaged not only black people, but also white people. Although most white people became well off as a result of apartheid, they did not become as morally good, or human, as they could have.

As is well known, Tutu maintained that, by *Ubuntu*, democratic South Africa was right to deal with apartheid-era political crimes by seeking reconciliation or restorative justice. If "social harmony is for us the *summum bonum*—the greatest good", then the primary aim when dealing with wrongdoing - as ones

who hold African values - should be to establish harmonious relationships between wrongdoers and victims. From this perspective, punishment merely for the purpose of paying back wrongdoers, in the manner of an eye for an eye, is unjustified.

Global Animosity

The nature of conflict and violence has transformed substantially since the UN was founded 75 years ago. Conflicts now tend to be less deadly and often waged between domestic groups rather than states. Homicides are becoming more frequent in some parts of the world, while gender-based attacks are increasing globally (UN.net). The long-term impact on development of inter-personal violence, including violence against children, is also more widely recognized.

Separately, technological advances have raised concerns about lethal autonomous weapons and cyber attacks, the weaponization of bots and drones, and the live streaming of extremist attacks. There has also been a rise in criminal activity involving data hacks and ransom ware, for example. Meanwhile, international cooperation is under strain, diminishing global potential for the prevention and resolution of conflict and violence in all forms.

Technological advances are contributing to the changing nature of conflict. There are concerns about the potential for artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning to enhance cyber, physical, and biological attacks. For example, by making them more finely targeted, harder to attribute, and easier for small groups perhaps even 'lone wolfs' to carry out (Sabri, 2013).

Emerging technologies are lowering the barriers to the acquisition of biological weapons – toxic substances or diseases used to harm or kill humans, livestock, and crops. There are concerns that advance in AI and 3D printing could facilitate biological attacks, by automating the development and production of the weapons and the systems that develop them.

There is also mounting international concern over the development of so-called lethal autonomous weapons (LAWs), which could identify and engage a specific target without human guidance, thereby transferring responsibility over life and death from human moral systems to complex data systems, devoid of an ethical compass (Sabri, 2013) The UN Secretary-General has called for fully autonomous weapons to be prohibited by international law, as have over 30 nations.

Religious violence is undergoing a revival. The past decade has witnessed a sharp increase in violent sectarian or religious tensions (Hsiang, 2013). These range from Islamic extremists waging global jihad and power struggles between Sunni and Shia Muslims in the Middle East to the persecution of Rohingya in Myanmar and outbreaks of violence between Christians and Muslims across Africa. According to

Pew, in 2018 more than a quarter of the world's countries experienced a high incidence of hostilities motivated by religious hatred, mob violence related to religion, terrorism, and harassment of women for violating religious codes.

The spike in religious violence is global and affects virtually every religious group. A 2018 Minority Rights Group report indicates that mass killings and other atrocities are increasing in countries both affected and not affected by war alike. While bloody encounters were recorded in over 50 countries, most reported lethal incidents involving minorities were concentrated in Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, India, Myanmar, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Hostilities against Muslims and Jews also increased across Europe, as did threats against Hindus in more than 18 countries (Hsiang, 2013) Making matters worse, 55 of the world's 198 countries imposed heightened restrictions on religions, especially Egypt, Russia, India, Indonesia and Turkey.

Today, crime kills far more people than armed conflicts. In 2017, almost half a million people across the world were killed in homicides, far surpassing the 89,000 killed in active armed conflicts and the 19,000 killed in terrorist attacks. If homicide rates keep climbing at the current rate of 4 per cent, then Sustainable Development Goals 16 – which includes a target 'to significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere' – will not be met by 2030.

Organised crime and gang violence vary widely across regions. Countries in the Americas have the worst homicide rates by a wide margin, accounting for 37 per cent of the global total in a region that accounts for only 13 per cent of the world's population. Political instability engenders organised crime, including targeted attacks against police, women, journalists, and migrants. Meanwhile political violence no longer affects only low-income states. In the past 15 years, more than half of the world's population has lived in direct contact or proximity to significant political violence.

For women and girls, the home remains the most dangerous place. Some 58 per cent of female homicides were carried out by intimate partners or family members in 2017, up from 47 per cent in 2012. Women bear the heaviest burden of lethal victimisation, often as a result of misogynistic beliefs, inequality, and dependency, which persist globally, especially in low-income countries.

Conflict remains the primary driver of terrorism, with more than 99 per cent of all terrorist-related deaths occurring in countries involved in a violent conflict or with high levels of political terror. The majority of deadly attacks take place in the Middle East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa, with Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia, and Syria, bearing the heaviest burden.

In countries with high levels of economic development, social alienation, lack of economic

opportunity, and state involvement in an external conflict are the major drivers of terrorist activity. In Western Europe, terrorism-related deaths have fallen dramatically

In a speech to the 1967 American Psychological Association convention, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (2018) made the case that the civil rights movement needed the help of social scientists. Specifically, he argued that it was urgent that social scientists help the White society understand its complicity in the development and maintenance of segregation and other inhumane policies directed toward Black people. He argued that this need was more pressing than research on preventing or ameliorating violence and other maladaptive behaviors among Black people.

Nevertheless, understanding and preventing violence that disproportionately affects minority communities emerged as major social science themes in the subsequent decades (Pettigrew, 2018). Consequently, there remains only limited research on racism and other forms of prejudice, and even less scientific study of the characteristics and dynamics of privilege tied to race, religion, gender, and class, or the mechanisms leading to the perpetration of hate-motivated violence. Psychology seldom turns its attention to research on power differentials and resource inequities, the mechanisms that are responsible for many of the harms of discrimination (Nation, 2008).

The Global Quest for inter- Culture

Interculturation is a powerful cause which plays a major part in interpersonal and professional relations. Derived from the Latin 'inter', between, and 'culturel', culture, interculturation is the sum of all relations and interactions between different cultures, through meetings and debates. This presumes intercultural exchange founded on dialogue, mutual respect and the desire to preserve the cultural identity of each one.

Interculturation is not multiculturalism which is several cultures living together without any mutual sharing or assimilation. It is different from acculturation which infers the modification of the culture of a group or of persons under the influence of another culture. It is the opposite of pluralism, a system whereby different ways of thinking are accepted so that people remain as individuals with no connection between them.

Interculturation is, on the contrary, openness to the diversity of others. It comes down to the way one sees the other and, from him, seeing oneself. It is the culture of understanding the human person. Originally, interculturation concerned chiefly the phenomenon of migration. Actually, the term appeared in the '70's in Europe concerning the integration of migrants. Then, it was extended to include every rupture of culture and can be applied to all types: ethnic, national, religion, generation or social group.

Interculturation is at the heart of the African scholars because our communities are a veritable mixtures of cultures: diversity of continent, language, generation and personality. Even at the beginnings, there was diversity of age and experience in the group –widows, young ladies, and experienced women. There was, too, the desire to open up beyond the frontiers of Lyons: Belleville, Monistrol, India, and, today, the Congregation is present in 28 countries.

The African scholars incorporate this theme in her First Priority: "Live pardon, reconciliation and healing", living unity in diversity, overcoming obstacles and promoting the growth of confidence. The African Delegation is working on this subject especially since the last Chapter on UNTU, a South African humanist philosophy which develops the thought "I am because we are". Thus UBUNTU faces us with the responsibility to work for the good of others. It promotes respect for everyone, co-operation, trust between individuals.

Ubuntu recognizes the value of each person and encourages the building of unity. Reflecting on the connection with the three priorities one finds the same philosophy expressing the same emphasis on openness, solidarity, fraternity and the spirit of self-sacrifice. The rest will follow.

COVID- 19 Pandemic

COVID-19 (Corona virus) has affected day to day life and is slowing down the global economy. This pandemic has affected thousands of peoples, who are either sick or are being killed due to the spread of this disease. The most common symptoms of this viral infection are fever, cold, cough, bone pain and breathing problems, and ultimately leading to pneumonia. This, being a new viral disease affecting humans for the first time, vaccines are not yet available. Thus, the emphasis is on taking extensive precautions such as extensive hygiene protocol (e.g., regularly washing of hands, avoidance of face to face interaction etc.), social distancing, and wearing of masks, and so on. This virus is spreading exponentially region wise. Countries are banning gatherings of people to the spread and break the exponential curve. Many countries are locking their population and enforcing strict quarantine to control the spread of the havoc of this highly communicable disease.

COVID-19 has rapidly affected our day to day life, businesses, disrupted the world trade and movements. Identification of the disease at an early stage is vital to control the spread of the virus because it very rapidly spreads from person to person. Most of the countries have slowed down their manufacturing of the products. The various industries and sectors are affected by the cause of this disease; these include the pharmaceuticals industry, solar power sector, tourism, Information and electronics industry. This virus creates significant knock-on effects on the daily life of citizens, as well as about the global economy.

The UN's Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to the COVID 19 Crisis warns that "The COVID-19 pandemic is far more than a health crisis: it is affecting societies and economies at their core. While the impact of the pandemic will vary from country to country, it will most likely increase poverty and inequalities at a global scale, making achievement of SDGs even more urgent.

Assessing the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on societies, economies and vulnerable groups is fundamental to inform and tailor the responses of governments and partners to recover from the crisis and ensure that no one is left behind in this effort.

Without urgent socio-economic responses, global suffering will escalate, jeopardizing lives and livelihoods for years to come. Immediate development responses in this crisis must be undertaken with an eye to the future. Development trajectories in the long-term will be affected by the choices countries make now and the support they receive."

The United Nations has mobilized the full capacity of the UN system through its 131 country teams serving 162 countries and territories, to support national authorities in developing public health preparedness and response plans to the COVID-19 crisis.

Over the next 12 to 18 months, the socio-economic response will be one of one of three critical components of the UN's COVID-19 response, alongside the health response, led by WHO, and the Global Humanitarian Response Plan.

As the technical lead for the socio-economic response, UNDP and its country offices worldwide are working under the leadership of the UN Resident Coordinators, and in close collaboration with specialized UN agencies, UN Regional Economic Commissions and IFIs, to assess the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on economies and communities.

Way forward and recommendations

Disasters fast reveal those people who are most vulnerable to their effects — and often why. In my experience, they always throw up astonishing examples of courage, selflessness and dedication — I have often seen people who are displaced from their homes find shelter with the poorest families. These days, much effort also goes into building resilience against disasters, and there is a growing recognition that it is most effective when it draws on and values local knowledge and understanding. The midst of a disaster is truly a humbling place.

Is there a comparison to be made between these disasters of many different kinds — and the response to them — and the current coronavirus pandemic, unfolding globally before all our eyes?

In one important respect, I think there is. "Common humanity" is a widely used phrase, so much so that it

is at risk of losing its value as a goal to bind us together at a time like this. But it is an immensely powerful concept, a definition in many ways of the concept of ubuntu,

To recognise ubuntu in much of the response there has already been to the Covid-19 pandemic — and to hope that it will underpin the response of individuals, communities and whole societies as the virus continues its spread — is invaluable. And because we are indebted to Africa for the concept it could help us keep in mind that many African countries and their health systems could be hit — and tested — very severely by the virus.

Conclusion

Within the confines of lockdown that has since seen most people stay at home for months, never has the philosophy, the ideology, the way of life of Ubuntu come alive more vividly than in the time of COVID-19. For once, watching news on television has not been all that depressing, as often a report on acts of kindness, of reaching out to others through that which defines us as being 'human' are movingly observed through the lens of Ubuntu.

Regulations on social distancing because of the COVID-19 pandemic have pretty much been redefined not to mean social isolation, but rather physical distancing only. From the time countries on the continent started implementing lockdown, political, religious and community leaders alike have been exhorting ordinary citizens not to forget those in need.

COVID-19 funds have been set up and both government and non-governmental initiatives have seen tireless activity by essential workers collecting and distributing food aid, medical supplies and other essentials.

In our circle of friends, neighbors, and acquaintances, we come across reports of how ordinary citizens are also playing their part. It is not uncommon to hear of a person that has lost a job or income and is in need of assistance, with family, friends, and even strangers at times, swiftly taking action to help the person in need. While the pockets of the rescuers might not necessarily be very deep, the ethos of 'I am because you are,' obliges people to share with those in need.

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