

UbuNtu philosophy as an African philosophy for peace

Summary & Comment: UbuNtu is one of several African approaches to a comprehensive understanding of the process of cultivating cohesion and positive human interaction with one another and with creation in daily life. The author offers his own definition and critical analysis as he examines the religious, political, and philosophical dimensions of ubuNtu and its foundation and emphasis on reciprocal, ethical responsibility that flows from interconnectedness and common humanity. DN

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Date Written: 14 March 2009

Key Words: ubuNtu, image of Africa, peace, philosophy,

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of understanding the image of Africa and the relevance of peace and development approaches brought in my mind the importance to look at the UbuNtu as one of African approaches of understanding the humanity as a process of building cohesion and humanness when it comes to building peace in our daily life. I shall look at the meaning of Ubuntu, its religious, political and philosophical dimensions which will allow grasping its foundation being based on the emphasis of promotion of ethics for the humankind. The last point will be to find some criticism especially some of dangers of Ubuntu, if one takes this notion for granted.

When we talk about philosophy, we tend to emphasize on the critical thinking that pushes reason to several questions about different realities of the life though sometimes it does not necessary give an answer to all. Etymologically, philosophy basically means the search, the love, the passion for wisdom. In ancient Greek, *philo* meant friend and *sophia*, wisdom. In other words, it is the longing and thirst to become wise when dealing with different situations, realities, whether being connected to human beings or to the rest of the cosmos, universe.

In this way, UbuNtu reveals its participation in the promotion of wisdom not only for human beings but also for the whole creation. Having this idea in mind, it is relevant to look first at the meaning of Ubuntu.

1. WHAT IS UBUNTU?

The word 'UbuNtu' comes from one of the Bantu dialects of Africa. It is a traditional African philosophy that gives an understanding of us as human beings in relation with the rest of the world. According to

Ubuntu, there exists a common link between us all and it is through this tie, through our interaction with our fellow human beings, that we discover our own human qualities. In Zulu one says, "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu", which means that a person is a person through other persons. We affirm our humanity when we acknowledge that of others.

Barbara argues that:

Ubuntu is the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony, and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community. Ubuntu calls on us to believe and feel that: Your pain is my pain, my wealth is your wealth, and your salvation is my salvation. In essence, Ubuntu, a term from Southern Africa, addresses our interconnectedness, our common humanity, and the responsibility to each other that flows from our connection. The eclipse of Ubuntu has darkened the spirit of modern-day African political systems. However, imagine the potential of ubuntu's sunlight, were it to be embraced as a vital part of the African renaissance or even as Africa's contribution to help a divided, fragmented world (Nussbaum, 2003: 21).

The eclipse of Ubuntu has been manifested in most of the leaders after independences whereby the leader was the center of everything being considered as the main reference, losing thereby the essence of Ubuntu that focuses on the community up-building. But in spite of some ruthless leaders, the essence of Ubuntu remains in the common people as Broodryk describes:

The African people have a more informal and relaxed way of living and speaking which manifest in singing, dancing, laughing, painting, and sculpturing. Many Africans regard this happier style of living as unique and peculiar to Africa. It is this reference to a certain way of living that makes Ubuntu life so different from life in other cultures. Africans are generally hesitant to endeavor giving a clear-cut definition of this unique type of partly, or at occasions totally, uninhibited expression of appreciation with life, even in times of temporary misery (Broodryk, 2006: 4).

This way of life may also be witnessed in different cultures of the world such in Asia. Stereotyping people would necessarily be a thing to be avoided, but at the same time the Ubuntu notion of life brings a particular connotation to African way of life. In spite of temporary misery, the African people would keep a positive sense of life while trying to overcome the situation. This leads us to try to look at the underlying dimension of Ubuntu having a religious aspect.

2. UBUNTU WITH RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS

For many communities in Africa, while they may belong to different societies and have different traditions and rituals, Ubuntu usually has a strong religious meaning. In general, the African belief is that your ancestors continue to exist amongst the living in the form of spirits and they are your link to the Divine Spirit. If one is in distress or need, he or she approaches the ancestors' spirits and they are the ones who will intercede on his or her behalf with God. That is why it is important to not only venerate the ancestors, but to, eventually, oneself become an ancestor worthy of veneration. For this, the person agrees to respect the community's rules; they undergo initiation to establish formal ties with both the current community members and those that have passed on, and they ensure harmony by adhering to the Ubuntu principles in the course of life.

The South African Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes Ubuntu as:

"It is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and is inextricably

bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. It speaks about wholeness, it speaks about compassion."A person with UbuNtu is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole. They know that they are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished when others are oppressed, diminished when others are treated as if they were less than who they are. The quality of Ubuntu gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them."

Nelson Mandela, the first president of post-apartheid South Africa, narrates his profound conviction rooted in UbuNtu approach:

I have always known that deep down in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his 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 the opposite. Even at the grimmest times in prison, when my comrades and I were pushed to our limits, I would see a glimmer of humanity in one of the guards, perhaps just for a second, but it was enough to reassure me and keep me going. Man's goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished (Mandela, 1994: 542).

This narration from Mandela is profoundly rooted in the UbuNtu perception of life. The fact that he could still keep find human's goodness in spite of all the grievances, it enlightens how capable human beings can cultivate a culture of peace that goes beyond vengeance and hatred. He still goes on giving further understanding of how being human is the key meaning of life for any human being:

It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred; he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not truly free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity [...] When I walked out of prison, that was my mission to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both [...] For 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 (Mandela, 1994: 544).

Being robbed one's humanity may be observed from the oppressor and the oppressed. But most of the times we tend to think that it is the oppressed that is the only loser. It is relevant to understand the rhetoric of Mandela when it comes to grasp the lost of humanness in the oppressor. This understanding underpins the religious dimension in UbuNtu perception about relationship among human beings. As I have discussed about Mandela, it is relevant to see the political aspect of UbuNtu in the context of South Africa and the African understanding in general.

3. UBUNTU WITH POLITICAL DIMENSION

Since the downfall of Apartheid in South Africa, UbuNtu is often mentioned in the political context to bring about a stronger sense of unity. For example, the passage of the White Paper for Social Welfare through the National Assembly signals the start of a new era in welfare delivery in South Africa. For the first time in South African history delivery in the welfare field is driven by key principles such as democracy, partnership, Ubuntu, equity, and inter-sectorial collaboration. The principle of caring for each other's well-being is being promoted, and a spirit of mutual support fostered. Each individual's

humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through recognition of the individual's humanity.

In this way, UbuNtu means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being though it is not perfect per se.

UbuNtu that stresses allowing every individual to have their equal say in any discussion and in ultimately reaching an agreement acceptable to all may lead to conformist behavior in order to achieve solidarity. It seems a trifle ironic that Group Politics and the Herd Mentality – the human qualities common to us all, in fact - could derail the quest for the common goal. But UbuNtu remains relevant for the whole world especially as it has served to reconcile the Black and White after a long period of full racial segregation.

Barbara sees a way forward that the world would embrace some of the African values:

African values could contribute much to world consciousness, but people in the West misunderstand Africa for many reasons.

- First, Africa's traditional culture is inaccessible because most of it is oral rather than written and lived rather than formally communicated in books or journals; it is difficult to learn about from a distance.
- Second, many African political leaders betrayed the philosophical and humanitarian principles on which African culture is based, and political failures in African countries tend to tarnish the views of many Westerners.
- Third, people in the West, for whatever reason, receive negative, limited information through the media; images of ethnic wars, dictatorships, famine, and AIDS predominate, so the potential contribution of African values is often lost (Nussbaum, 2003: 21).

What Barbara Nussbaum stipulates reflects what is going on in the worldview of most of non-Africans. By non-Africans I want to avoid reducing the issue to only the Westerners. This perception hinders the possibility to discover deep values from Africa. Things are interconnected from the Western way of looking at Africa to the local elites and leaders' distortion of those important and underlying African values. One of African values may be found in the Ubuntu aspect connected to social life as a philosophy.

4. UBUNTU WITH PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSION

The good points outweigh the shortcomings. Given the vast racial, cultural, religious, educational, and socio-economic differences apparent not just in South-African society but the world over currently, the concept of UbuNtu is really rather relevant. It is easy to go into the 'us and them' pattern. It is also easy to fall into the trap of judging a different people by our standards or by sticking to certain established stereotypical notions. If one instead regards someone as a fellow human being, all individual quirks and differences taken into account, there is perhaps a greater chance of achieving understanding. This is when socio-philosophical dimension of UbuNtu comes in. It revolutionizes the concept of individuality that is based on Cartesian thinking, as Dirk recognizes:

Ubuntu's respect for the particularity of the other links up closely to its respect for individuality. But, be it noted the individuality which UbuNtu respects, is not of Cartesian making. On the contrary, Ubuntu directly contradicts the Cartesian conception of individuality in terms of which the individual or self can be conceived without thereby necessarily conceiving the other. The Cartesian individual exists prior to, or separately and independently from the rest of the community or society. The rest of

society is nothing but an added extra to a pre-existent and self-sufficient being. This "modernistic" and "atomistic" conception of individuality lies at the bottom of both individualism and collectivism. Individualism exaggerates seemingly solitary aspects of human existence to the detriment of communal aspects. Collectivism makes the same mistake, only on a larger scale. For the collectivist, society is nothing but a bunch or collection of separately existing, solitary (i.e. detached) individuals (Dirk, 1998).

This argument structures the fundamental philosophical approach of Ubuntu. The "Cogito ergo sum" is not the opposite of "Ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu", because the Cartesian individuality finds its opponent in collectivism whereby the individual vanishes and only becomes a part of community without any strong relevance. The UbuNtu individuality encompasses the centrality of individual but with the framework of the society betterment. This may be understood better with the following

Dirk's argument:

By contrast, UbuNtu defines the individual in terms of his/her relationship with others. According to this definition, individuals only exist in their relationships with others, and as these relationships change, so do the characters of the individuals. Thus understood, the word "individual" signifies a plurality of personalities corresponding to the multiplicity of relationships in which the individual in question stands. [...] This is all somewhat boggling for the Cartesian mind, whose conception of individuality now has to move from solitary to solidarity, from independence to interdependence, from individuality vis-à-vis community to individuality à la community (Dirk, 1998).

In other words, UbuNtu goes far away from collectivism or a pure Cartesian individuality. It starts from the individual capacitation, promotion and self-creativity to his or her relation with the others. The solitaire individual or the collective individual is transformed in an individual filled with sense of solidarity towards the community. In the western approach, it would be a capitalist with human face or rather a fully human being with elements of capitalism. Having discussed about important dimensions of UbuNtu concept, it is relevant to discover some of its danger or limitations when one may take it for granted in one way or another.

5. CRITICS ON UBUNTU

After understanding that this concept of UbuNtu has a great foundation in the African culture or way of life, one can raise certain questions. If it is so, why then a society or a nation such as Rwanda, knowing the UbuNtu thinking, would allow genocide to occur; why are several tribal clashes and civil wars happening in the land where supposedly UbuNtu understanding is rooted? Is there any danger to romanticize the UbuNtu thoughts so to even forget to deal in reality with the root causes of certain conflicts? And many other questions can come up to keep in mind that UbuNtu is not the absolute approach to understanding the life of human beings, but it has its share and contribution for the peace culture.

Van Binsbergen discovers that UbuNtu runs the danger of denying other possibilities of identification among some Africans, as he argues:

But we hit here on a theoretical danger of UbuNtu. Use of this term tempts us to deny all other possibilities of identification between Southern African actors (i.e., fellow-citizens of the same state, fellow-inhabitants of the same local space) except at the most abstract, most comprehensive level of mankind as a whole: as fellow human beings. It is as if in a gathering of humans one appeals to the fundamental unity of all vertebrates, or of all animate beings, instead of resorting to the lower, relatively local, and obviously more effectively binding, category of humans; or as if one addresses the members of one's family appealing to their shared identity, not as family members, but as fellow-

nationals, coreligionists, fellow-Africans, or any other category far wider than the comfortably narrow scope of the family. It is in short the perplexing and demobilizing choice of the wrong level of aggregation (Van Binsbergen, 2002: 75).

Van Binsbergen's understanding of UbuNtu tends to reduce it to the collectivism, which, in fact, I have demonstrated in the philosophical dimension is not a sort of collectivism; but rather it is an individualistic solidarity. UbuNtu calls on Africans to be true to the legacy of their ancestral culture. It calls for a liberation of Africans not so much from the colonizing gaze of others, but from colonization per se, from the practice of colonization, whether of Africans or by Africans.

CONCLUSION

New tendencies to understand Africa should deepen the notion of looking at different cultural heritage from all over the world and no longer the monolithic approach based on the standards of only the West. The academia would revisit certain approaches that are not necessarily following the pattern of the rigorous scientific frameworks. It would encompass certain elements such intuition, imagination, popular wisdom, proverbs and other many ways of perceiving the reality from different cultures. I looked at UbuNtu in its fundamental meaning. This led to understand its religious aspect since it has some elements that can be found in different spiritualities of the world.

I went on looking at the political aspect and the philosophical concept. It has been possible to understand that the individual remains important in the Ubuntu philosophy, but at the same time the individual's integration in the community is determinant. I then recognized that Ubuntu is not the only way of understanding life: it has its shortcomings especially if one is not careful by romanticizing it and overlooking the complexity of certain conflict realities. It has played its role in the reconciliation process in the post-apartheid period in South Africa, though it did not resolve all the issues.

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