

African Ethics
An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics

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Ubuntu and its Socio-moral Significance

MLULEKI MUNYAKA AND MOKGETHI MOTLHABI

INTRODUCTION

Although there are many diverse African cultures, there are commonalities to be found among them in such areas as value systems, beliefs and practices. These areas largely reflect the African world view. The most abiding principle of this world view is known as *Ubuntu* (humanism or humaneness). *Ubuntu* is an old philosophy and way of life that has for many centuries sustained the African communities in South Africa, in particular, and in Africa as a whole. The word *Ubuntu* is found in almost all African languages in South Africa: *Ubuntu* is from IsiNguni; in Sesotho it is *Botho*; in XiTsonga the word is translated as *Vumunhi*; while in TshiVenda it is *Uhuthu*. It is interesting to note that, according to Kamwangamalu, the concept *Ubuntu* is also found in many other African languages, though not necessarily under the same name. He writes:

[T]his concept has phonological variants in a number of African languages: *umundu* in Kikuyu and *umuntu* in Kimeru, both languages spoken in Kenya; *bumuntu* in kiSukuma and kiHaya, both spoken in Tanzania; *vumuntu* in shiTsonga and shiTswa of Mozambique; *bomoto* in Bobangi, spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo; *gimuntu* in kiKongo and giKwese, spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola, respectively (1999: 25).

Ubuntu continues to be 'a set of institutionalized ideals which guide and direct the patterns of life of Africans. It becomes a notion descriptive of a convergent set

of desired goals which all, or at least most, Africans entertain and towards which their activities are directed' (Sogolo 1993: 119).

It is important, therefore, to have an understanding of what *Ubuntu* is since we believe its meaning and effects are still relevant today. This sentiment is echoed by Broodryk when he says that *Ubuntu* is 'the whole complex of traditional behaviour which has been developed by the human race and is successfully learned by each generation . . . *Ubuntu* cultural norms have been orally transferred from generation to generation over a long time, and have never been produced as literature or written form' (1997: 22).

DEFINITIONS OF *UBUNTU*

The word *Ubuntu* has not been immune to misuse and overuse. It is a strong, meaningful and loaded concept or value. African people consider it the most important quality of *umuntu* (a human being). This leads to the question: what, exactly, is *Ubuntu*? With the help of various authors' descriptions and definitions, this chapter will try to show what others understand *Ubuntu* to be, with a view to giving a description or definition of the concept that will be all-encompassing and embracing.

Buntu Mfenyana, 'a socio-linguist who is particularly interested in the origin of ISINTU, the African way of life', traces for us the linguistic origins of the concept *Ubuntu*. He maintains that to understand the 'original meaning of ubuntu we must separate the prefixes and suffixes that surround the root NTU, or what the Sothos is THO . . . The prefix UBU refers to the abstract [while] NTU is an ancestor who got human society going. He gave us our way of life as human beings' (1986: 18). Regrettably, Mfenyana does not elaborate further on this ancestor Ntu and there is no mention of him or her in most of the literature relating to *Ubuntu* that has been studied. However, since most of the sources used in ethical scholarship are non-African writings, it is possible that one would have to study African literature, in this case IsiXhosa, to come across Mfenyana's definition of *Ubuntu* and learn more about this name.

Most common definitions refer to *Ubuntu* as a derivative of the word *muntu*, meaning a person, a human being. According to Chinkanda, the word defines a positive quality supposedly possessed by a person. It is 'an internal state of being or the very essence of being human' (1994: 1). *Ubuntu*, it is said, is not only about

human acts; it is also about contributing to the well-being of others. Chinkanda and best expressed by the saying 'I am because we are' enables human beings to live more accurately. It is more accurate to say that *Ubuntu* is a human being. Having *Ubuntu* according to one's humanity is a human being. This makes it impossible to lack *Ubuntu* as being inhuman.

From the sociological perspective, *Ubuntu* represents the kind of human society through established norms (S3). This definition explains how it is achieved and maintained. These descriptions and definitions cited imply that *Ubuntu* is a spiritual foundation, a good which motivates, characterises, and leads towards others. It is a way of life best realised or made evident.

THE NATURE AND CHARACTER OF *UBUNTU*

Ubuntu as a way of life finds its roots in various African languages. In isiXhosa, *umuntu ke motho ka batho* means a person is one who considers other persons. This is one of the meanings Sparks believes that this word carries. It helps to diffuse the ego and those who do not contribute to the quality of *Ubuntu* that distinguishes a person.

As an abstract concept, *Ubuntu* has components that can be identified in persons and the important

human acts; it is also about being, it is a disposition, and it concerns values that contribute to the well-being of others and of community. Mnyandu concurs with Chinkanda and best expresses this notion of being when he adds that *Ubuntu* 'enables human beings to become *abantu* or humanised beings' (1997: 81). It is more accurate to say that *Ubuntu* is a person's self-realisation and manifestation as a human being. Having *Ubuntu*, or being human, is identified with behaving according to one's human nature and, by implication, in a manner that befits a human being. This makes it possible, in this sense, to denounce a person perceived to lack *Ubuntu* as being inhuman – literally, a non-person.

From the sociological perspective, Saule is accurate in defining *Ubuntu* as representing the kind of human behaviour that is 'inculcated in the individual by society through established traditional institutions over a period of time' (1996: 83). This definition explains how *Ubuntu* is attained, namely, through socialisation. These descriptions and definitions show where the idea of *Ubuntu* originated and how it is achieved and manifested. Although there is no single definition, all those cited imply that *Ubuntu* is more than just a manifestation of individual acts. It is a spiritual foundation, an inner state, an orientation, and a disposition towards good which motivates, challenges and makes one perceive, feel and act in a humane way towards others. It is a way of life that seeks to promote and manifest itself and is best realised or made evident in harmonious relations within society.

THE NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF *UBUNTU*

Ubuntu as a way of life finds meaning in the expression which recurs across the various African languages in Southern Africa: *umntu ngumntu ngabany' abantu* (Xhosa) or *motho ke motho ka batho ba babang* (Sotho) meaning, a person is a person through other persons. This is one of the basic and central tenets of the ethic of *Ubuntu*. Sparks believes that this notion, or expression, of mutuality is in the African psyche. It helps to diffuse the individual ego and makes Africans less prone to acts that do not contribute to community building (1990: 249). It is this feature or quality of *Ubuntu* that distinguishes a human person from other creatures.

As an abstract concept, *Ubuntu* is supported and made concrete by certain components that can be identified in the above expression, such as respect for persons and the importance of community, personhood and morality.

UNDERSTANDING THE PERSON

The African understanding of a person refers to beliefs and perceptions of the person as an individual. A person in the *Ubuntu* world view is the basis, centre and end of everything; *izinto* (all other things) only make sense in relation to persons. *Regardless of their social status, gender or race, persons are recognised, accepted, valued and respected for their own sake.* Steve Biko was correct when he said that a person is the cornerstone of society. He elaborates that man – and, it should be added, woman – is valuable in himself or herself: ‘not just his welfare, not his material well being but just man himself with all his ramifications’ (1978: 46).

According to this world view, all people have *isidima* (dignity), which makes a person divine and therefore to be respected and valued. Pato maintains that *isidima* stems from the belief that ‘a person is created by God even though this belief is not often expressed in explicit theological terms. It is equally believed that life is the highest gift of God to humanity’ (1997: 55). Anything which may undermine, hurt, threaten or destroy human beings is not accommodated in this way of life but frowned upon as it affects the very foundation of society: the human person. A person is not a thing or a number but something much more valuable. Whether a person is known or not, it is expected that he or she should be accorded respect. Respect for a person, accompanied by acceptable good behaviour, is crucial. It signifies recognition of another person’s humanity. Such recognition is expressed more clearly in the Zulu term of greeting, *sawubona* (we see you – we acknowledge your presence, your humanity). Thus respect, motivated by *Ubuntu*, is evident in the way people relate, talk and show courtesy to one another. People are recognised and regarded as equals by virtue of their humanity.

Every individual in African society values being recognised and treated as an equal and with respect. The requirement to show respect becomes evident should someone undermine or ill-treat another. Others may intervene by simply asserting and reminding the perpetrator that the victim *ungumntu* (is a person). The victim may also intervene directly by asserting *ndingumntu nam* (I, too, am a human being or a person). If the perpetrator has a conscience, he or she will immediately refrain from adverse actions. People are conscious of their common humanity, which has a certain dignity, integrity and value to be acknowledged, respected and valued; and that no one is either superior or inferior in humanity. A human person is a person irrespective of his or her status in life. One 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. respect is also highlighted her human worth.

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harmful to a human person. It flourishes in respect and honour for others. Mutual respect is also highlighted – what is important is not just the individual but his or her human worth.

Tefo rightly argues that *Ubuntu* is not different from other philosophies of the world in this regard, and that there is nothing extraordinary about it. He states:

This philosophy is encapsulated in all the philosophies of the world, though it might be articulated and actualised differently. Effectively, therefore, it would be ethnocentric and, indeed, silly to suggest that the Botho ethic is uniquely African. The mere fact that the tenets that underpin this philosophy are intensely expressed by Africans, do [sic] not make those values exclusively African (1998: 4).

It may be true that there is nothing unique about *Ubuntu* in this regard, since all societies and religions share the same basic values and speak of upholding respect for human dignity. For Africans, however, as Motlhabi has remarked, it is in the concept of *Ubuntu* that the person is recognised as of the highest and intrinsic value (1985: 94).

Biko also supports this idea in an article entitled 'Some African cultural concepts':

We believe in the inherent goodness of man. We enjoy man for himself. We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life. Hence in all we do we always place Man [sic] first (1978: 42).

Biko understood that the human person has dignity from cradle to and beyond the grave. He amplifies this when he says: 'There was no hell in our religion. We believed in the inherent goodness of man – hence we took it for granted that all people at death joined the community of saints and therefore merited our respect' (1978: 93). *Umntu* (a person) thus constitutes the basis from which *Ubuntu* can be understood. A person is the basis of all ethical actions. As an expression of such ethical behaviour, *Ubuntu* is a 'cultural ethos, a spirituality, which is not necessarily

better, or superior, or for that matter inferior to those of other people, but from which others can learn and improve their understanding of one another (Pato 1997: 53). This is how it should be understood by those people who see nothing uniquely African in *Ubuntu*. When considering community as a constitutive element of *Ubuntu*, the importance of a person will be seen again, as a moral, social, relational and compassionate being. It is these qualities that enable him or her to attain personhood.

UBUNTU AND COMMUNITY

In the African world view, the community is the context for the manifestation of both umuntu and Ubuntu. The value and dignity of persons is best realised in relationships with others. One cannot be a human being alone, only in community. An African individual is a communal being, inseparable from and incomplete without others. Mbiti explains this as follows:

Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people. When he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours and his relatives whether dead or living. When he gets married, he is not alone, neither does the wife "belong" to him alone, so also the children belong to the corporate body of kinsmen, even if they bear only their father's name. What happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am." This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man (1969: 108-09).

Everyone belongs and there is no one who does not belong. The sense of belonging is necessary, important and central in *Ubuntu*. One belongs or finds community through being a 'neighbour, friend, relative, clansman, a member of a tribe or nation and so on. This African sense of community, Setiloane asserts, extends beyond family, clan or tribe: 'Exclusion of the "other" simply because it is "other" and different is a foreign western importation' (1986: 10). Setiloane may be stating

his point in a somewhat different way. One belongs to others by virtue of being human, and is, ideally, inclusive.

Attempts are always made to define *Ubuntu* in terms of relatives and make the concept too narrow and give them African examples. For example, a person living in South Africa who is a member of the *Thamsanqa*, by membership of that clan, is not a member of the *Ubuntu* and one of them. Some people have given Xhosa clan names as examples of a person a feeling of belonging to the community. A person who is not fully human. He or she is not a member of the community is not just a person; it is:

A group of persons who are biologically, who are related and who have common interests and values. This is the notion in fact of a group of persons with common interests, goals, and values. The group is an association of individuals and values. The group is an attachment to a group and are ready to pursue the group's interests.

Individuals consider themselves as socialised to think of themselves as a person who does not belong to a group is a danger. This belongs to the notion of identity and security. This is a danger for narrow individuals who are referred to as *inkomo*. This is a danger to thrive alone and

his point in a somewhat exaggerated way, but what this all means is that one belongs to others by reason of one's common humanity; the African world view is, ideally, inclusive.

Attempts are always made to accommodate those who do not seem to have relatives and make them part of the community. People try to befriend such persons and give them African or clan names. For instance, Jean Baptiste, a refugee from Rwanda living in South Africa's Eastern Cape, was given the Xhosa name, *Thamsanqa*, by members of his adopted community who thus saw him as a person and one of them. Some white Catholic missionaries in the same region have been given Xhosa clan names, such as Gatyeni, Tshawe and Mgcina. Such naming gives a person a feeling of belonging and enables him or her to be incorporated into the community. A person is incomplete without others. He or she needs others to be fully human. He or she needs community to find fulfilment. For Africans, community is not just a collection of individuals who happen to be together; it is:

A group of persons linked by interpersonal bonds, biological and/or non biological, who consider themselves primarily as members of the group and who have common interests, goals, and values. The notion of common interests and values is crucial to an adequate conception of community; the notion in fact defines the community. It is the notion of common interests, goals, and values that differentiates a community from a mere association of individual persons. Members of a community share goals and values. They have intellectual and ideological, as well as emotional, attachments to those goals and values; as long as they cherish them, they are ready to pursue and defend them (Coetzee and Roux 1998: 320).

Individuals consider themselves integral parts of the whole community. A person is socialised to think of himself, or herself, as inextricably bound to others. One who does not belong to, or has not been made part of, the community is considered a danger. This belonging does not only make one complete but gives one a sense of identity and security. Seeing oneself as part of the community leaves little room for narrow individualism. A loner is viewed with suspicion. He or she will be referred to as *inkomo edla yodwa* (a cow that grazes on its own). Such a person tries to thrive alone and yet existence is intertwined with that of others. To Africans,

although a person is other things as well, he or she is primarily a being in community.

It is in a human community that an individual is able to realise himself or herself as a person. The personal growth of individuals happens in community. Only through the co-operation, influence and contribution of others, can one understand and bring to fulfilment one's own personality. One is able to discover a sense of self-identity only in reference to the community in which one lives. Shutte, when speaking about the African conception of humanity, drives the point home when he says that humanity:

is not something that I can acquire, or develop, by my own isolated power. I can only exercise or fulfil my humanity as long as I remain in touch with others for it is they who empower me . . . "remaining in touch" is not just a sociological notion but a moral one. It implies certain chosen attitudes on my part and qualities of relationship with others (cited in Connor, Decook and Hartin 1991: 189).

PERSON, COMMUNITY AND *UBUNTU*

Adherence to acceptable behavioural patterns helps in the maintenance of fellowship, oneness and identity. Moreover, it points to the interdependence that exists among people. This is so because biological, socio-economic and cultural factors put constraints on a person's autonomy. In the western view, an autonomous person, as described by Hollis:

acts freely by definition. He acts freely only if he has good reasons for what he does (and no better reasons for doing something else). He has good reasons, only if he acts in his ultimate interests. His ultimate interests derive from what he essentially is. What he essentially is depends on what is essential to his being that particular person (cited in Sogolo 1993: 131).

From this depiction one discovers a type of autonomy that is understood in an absolutist and almost exclusivist sense. An autonomous person is thus completely independent, acts for his or her own interest and trusts his or her own judgement. In the context of *Ubuntu*, however, autonomy is understood and practised in

relation to the community of the individual. *Ubuntu*

Within the context of solidarity with one another, *Ubuntu* becomes more than the support of those around one's part in contributing to the qualities of individuals or go unnoticed. Such as *akangomntu, ha se motho* observations made in a person's humanity, it is "Expressions like "ha his "ubuntu" or human anti-community behaviour and co-operation, regarded as considered sacrificed to contribute to the bringing about harm, manifestations of damage functioning and well-

Frowning upon self co-existence. The state of community that defines the desired standard of inherent dignity but that contribute to the that he or she lacks it does not, strictly, contribute to the definition or social status, goes towards, or in relation

Disapproval of self *Ubuntu* ethics can be their own good with

relation to the community in that it is tied to the role the community has assigned the individual. *Ubuntu* is based strongly on the collective.

Within the context of *Ubuntu*, people are family. They are expected to be in solidarity with one another especially during times of duress when the need for *Ubuntu* becomes more acute. Persons in need should be able to count on the support of those around them. And when some are in need others must play their part in contributing to their good and that of society. Individuals manifesting qualities of individualism and selfishness, or a lack of caring, do not escape scrutiny or go unnoticed. Such individuals are described as *akanabuntu* (lacking *Ubuntu*) or *akangomntu*, *ha se motho* (not a person, not human). These are strong statements or observations made in judgement. Although this is seen as 'derecognition' of another person's humanity, it is a way of expressing displeasure at bad behaviour or practice. 'Expressions like "ha se motho . . ." do not mean he is dead, but that he has lost his "ubuntu" or humanness. "Ubuntu" can be lost completely – through one's anti-community behaviour' (Sebidi 1988: 4). In such an instance, compassion and co-operation, regarded as essential virtues for the survival of community, are considered sacrificed. Individualistic, self-centred acts are seen not just as a failure to contribute to the well-being of both the person and the community, but as bringing about harm, misery and pain to others. Such acts are disapproved of as manifestations of dangerous elements disruptive to society and undesirable for its functioning and well-being.

Frowning upon such actions helps to discipline members and also promotes co-existence. The statements *akangomntu* and *akanabuntu* demonstrate that it is community that defines a person and judges whether he or she has attained the desired standard of humanity (in the moral sense) or not. A person may have inherent dignity but part of being a person is to have feelings and moral values that contribute to the well-being of others. To call a person *akangomntu* is to say that he or she lacks the inner state of being that feels sympathy for others. This does not, strictly, take away a person's intrinsic worth but shows that one contributes to the definition of oneself through everything one does. One's identity, or social status, goes hand in hand with one's responsibility or sense of duty towards, or in relation to, others.

Disapproval of selfish acts challenges a person not to be enslaved by self-interest. *Ubuntu* ethics can be termed anti-egoistic as it discourages people from seeking their own good without regard for, or to the detriment of, others and the

community. *Ubuntu* promotes the spirit that one should live for others; it further proves that all 'persons form a single person, not as parts form a whole, but as friends draw their life and character from the spirit of a common friend' (Deacon, Shutte and Smit 1999: 48). According to Sebidi, the African definition of a person is not static. As he puts it, 'For [Africans] human nature is capable of increasing or decreasing almost to a point of total extinction. There are actions or behavioural patterns that are conducive to the enhancement or growth of a person's nature, just as there are those which are destructive of a person's nature' (1988: 4).

Cochrane extends this point by saying that bad actions lead to alienation from self: 'self is understood as constructed in relation to the other whose distancing then implies not only a loss of the other in some degree, but to a proportional degree, also the loss of self . . . without the other there is no self' (1998: 406). What one discovers, therefore, is that *Ubuntu* rejects individualism; it is 'anti individualism [and pro communalism] while at the same time it is incurably religious' (Sebidi 1988: 3). Behavioural patterns that are incompatible with *Ubuntu* lead to tension and conflict among people.

Ubuntu is a philosophy of tolerance and compassion that also embraces forgiveness. A person who persists in undesirable actions may be ostracised and rejected. There is, however, room for forgiveness; not to have the capacity for forgiveness would be to lack *Ubuntu*. Thus the sayings *umntu akalahlwa* (one cannot completely discard a person for wrongdoing) and *umntu akancanywa* (one cannot give up on a person). For Saule, this is so because 'a person without *ubuntu* would have no peace of mind and might continue to hurt himself if he/she is not checked' (1996: 93). These two sayings promote and encourage forgiveness. Their concern:

is not retribution or punishment but . . . 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. This is a far more personal approach, which sees the offence as something that has happened to people and whose consequence is a rupture in relationships (1996: 93).

These two sayings express a hope that a person will improve and mend his or her ways. Attempts are always made to make sure that one remains within the

community and abides by its norms. Pressure will be applied to ensure that one remains within the community. From this, according to

that there need not be a loss of self since it is possible for one to live for the interests for the survival of the community, thus, one is also sure that one's well-being will be enhanced as the community is founded on the well-being among its members

Although someone who is ostracised (being without humanity) is still a member of the community, he or she no longer possesses humanity and remains and cannot be transformed by her conduct, manifested in her being human and able to live. This sentiment is best expressed in the saying [umntu akalahlwa] under the circumstances whatever the circumstances, a community that individualistic treatment' (1998: 6).

THE MORAL EDGE OF *Ubuntu*

Ubuntu is not an individualistic philosophy; being neighbourly, and is based on this consciousness as 'a duty of all and sisters jointly involve in the life of life' (1978: 42). Individualism to others in a humane and

Living in relation with others, roles, duties, obligations

community and abides by the values, norms and practices of that particular community. Pressure will be exerted to ensure that good relations are maintained. From this, according to Coetzee and Roux, it follows:

that there need not be any tension between individuality and community since it is possible for an individual freely to give up his/her own perceived interests for the survival of the community. But in giving up one's interest thus, one is also sure that the community will not disown one and that one's well-being will be its concern. It is a life of give and take . . . For the community is founded on notions of an intrinsic and enduring relationship among its members (1998: 295-96).

Although someone who has transgressed may be termed *akanabuntu* or *akangomntu* (being without humanity or not human), it does not mean that he or she is not still a member of the community. Furthermore, it does not mean that he or she no longer possesses human nature or human dignity, as a person's intrinsic value remains and cannot be taken away. The only problem with such a person is his or her conduct, manifested in the lack of, or refusal to make use of, an inner state of being human and able to do good deeds for the well-being of others and society. This sentiment is best addressed by Netshitomboni when he says: 'This idiom [*umntu akalahlwa*] underscores the need for respect for human life and dignity whatever the circumstances. No matter what wrong an individual has done to the community that individual remains a human being worthy of humane and equal treatment' (1998: 6).

THE MORAL EDGE OF UBUNTU

Ubuntu is not an individualistic, abstract or cold spiritual way of life. It is about being neighbourly, and is imbued with a strong social consciousness. Biko described this consciousness as 'a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to varied problems of life' (1978: 42). Individuality only makes sense in so far as an individual relates to others in a humane and concrete way:

Living in relation with others directly involves a person in social and moral roles, duties, obligations, and commitments which the individual person

must fulfil. The natural relationality of the person thus immediately plunges him/her into a moral universe, making morality an essentially social and trans-individual phenomenon focused in the well being of others. Our natural sociality then prescribes or mandates a morality that, clearly, should be weighted on the side of duty, i.e. on that which one has to do for others (Coetzee and Roux 1998: 332).

Ubuntu is inclusive. Because it is manifested in living in community, it is best realised in deeds of kindness, compassion, caring, sharing, solidarity and sacrifice. Such acts produce positive results for both individuals and community. They make it possible for an individual to count on and expect the meaningful support of fellow human beings. People are expected to share the resources with which they are blessed. Furthermore, because such actions contribute positively to those in need, they maintain and preserve community cohesion.

A person in possession of such good qualities is considered *ungumntu onobuntu* (to be a humane person). This recognises and affirms one's humanity which reveals:

that it is only through the awareness that others have of us that we can become aware of ourselves as self-determining agents. Nor can the awareness that the other has of us be of just any kind at all. It must include the recognition that we are persons and, what is most important, a consent to us as such. In other words the other person must have an affirmative attitude to me, must recognize my value. Without this, normal personal awareness and activity are impossible (Connor, Decock and Hartin 1991: 190).

The idea that one *ungumntu* (is a person) shows that to have full humanity is to have lived out and demonstrated qualities conducive to good neighbourliness and to have matured in positive human relations. Carrying out duties that contribute to the well-being of others transforms and confers on an individual the full status of being a human. A person's humanity is discovered and recognised through good relations and interactions with others. This affirmation gives recognition to the gifts, abilities and capacity for growth one has been endowed with that oblige one to contribute positively to the well-being of others. This demonstrates, further, that self-interest is sacrificed and that the other takes priority (Saulle 1996: 87).

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Ubuntu is a call to participation. It demands service to humanity in a practical way. Through positive acts within the community, one is connected, linked and bound to others. The best way to contribute to society is through practical communal action to alleviate human suffering. The main principle is to provide assistance, with the stronger helping the weaker members of the community.

Ubuntu is the source or basis of feelings of compassion responsible for making life more humane for others, in particular the disadvantaged, the sick, bereaved and poor as well as strangers. There is commitment to advance their interests and concerted effort is made to do so. These acts help to 'bring sense not only to one's own life but also to the lives of others' (Broodryk 1997: 74). Sebidi drives the point home when he says: 'Ubuntu is humanism with the accent on the humane. It is, perhaps, this aspect of ubuntu which prompted the Senegalese ex-President, Leopold Senghor, a wee bit when he writes: emotion is African; . . . ubuntu is primarily emotionally or feelingly humane' (1988: 5).

UBUNTU IN RELATION TO STRANGERS

Having explained the basic concept of *Ubuntu*, particularly its component of respect for others and the need to be in community to assist one another, this chapter now turns to the attitudes of Africans towards strangers. These are underpinned by respect – or recognition of a common humanity – and all that follows as a corollary. In previous epochs, African attitudes towards strangers or foreigners were characterised by tolerance and benevolence. Strangers were made to feel welcome and to move with ease within the community. They were referred to as *iindwendwe* (visitors, guests or aliens) or *abahambi* (sojourners). These words have positive connotations. They amount to saying to a person, 'You are welcome, we will help you and we respect you'.

The position of strangers as *iindwendwe* or *abahambi* made it easier for the hosts to welcome them because their presence was mostly only for a day or so at a time (Shack and Skinner 1979: 37) – that is, they were not part of the family, tribe or group and their stay among the group was temporary. They were treated with respect and shown hospitality. *limbacu* (refugees), as people who are homeless and often alienated from their land and families, were treated with compassion and kindness. They were regarded as *abantu abahlelekileyo* (people who are deprived, poor). Because of their deprived position, they were given special treatment, such

as being allocated land. Some merged with the local people. Their security at times lay in their absorption into the local milieu through cultural assimilation and intermarriage.

People were taught to be conscious of strangers. Some proverbs call upon people not to ill-treat or close a door to a stranger but to show hospitality. One of these is *unyawo alunampumlo*, in Xhosa, or *looto ha lena nko*, in Sotho (the foot has no nose); that is, one should beware of one's unkind actions as they have a way of turning against the doer. Since no one knows when one will be a stranger in a foreign land and in need of hospitality or good treatment, one should not make things difficult for a stranger. One has an extensive obligation to admit, and be generous and supportive to, strangers. Similar words were uttered in South Africa some years ago by a refugee from Sudan, when he said, 'The manner in which we now look to you for help today may be the way you will be looking to others tomorrow. We must realize that whatever we are able to do for People on the Move while we have the opportunity, we are doing for ourselves as well as for others' (Kifle 1991: 260).

Even though this proverb seems to be based on self-interest – because caring for another may prove advantageous at a future time – it is instilled into people as an obligation of love and caring. It was also a matter of justice; for someone to be harmed while staying in or passing through a particular village would bring a sense of shame, grief and scandal to the whole area. A stranger was a good advertisement for a particular family or village, especially if treated with openness and friendliness. On the way and after arriving home, he or she would be able to talk positively about the hosts and the good treatment received. People are encouraged to be generous and give food to strangers: *Isisu somhambi asingakanani, singaphambili, ngemwa ngumhlonzo* (the stomach of a traveller is not big, it is only in front; it is limited by the spine). This proverb tells of people's readiness to help, feed and protect a stranger. This disposition is attested to by Saule when he says: 'In any Xhosa household a stranger or a visitor is a respected person. He/she is treated cordially, given water to wash, food to eat and a place to sleep. He/she would in turn spread the good news about that particular household' (1996: 86).

Indeed, travellers or strangers were served with food unreservedly. Their presence was seen as more of a blessing than a burden and, as a corollary, brought joy to children as they knew that the best meals would be served. This aspect of hospitality may explain why, among the Batswana people, there is a saying which states,

Moeng goroga re je ka ...
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attitude one should be ...
was about more than ...
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These proverbs ...
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Such positive a ...
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Moeng goroga re je ka wena (Come visitor so that we can feast through you). This proverb is a call to be ever generous to the stranger. It is also a revelation about the attitude one should have regarding using one's resources. Giving food to strangers was about more than just satisfying their physical hunger; it was a 'barometer of social relations, and a powerful mechanism for both creating sociability and alternatively, for destroying it' (David and Martin 1997: 1104). It was a challenge to open one's boundaries and be receptive and generous.

These proverbs reveal the moral values behind African friendliness and benevolence towards, and concern for, strangers. Strangers were accepted as innocent, with dignity and, therefore, worthy of respect. Their needs were recognised, and a genuine attempt made to meet them as far as humanly possible. Their plight was understood, away from home and in need of food, shelter, rest and protection. They were encouraged to take part in social activities and generally made to feel at home.

Such positive attitudes and actions also created stability because strangers knew what to expect and what was expected of them. The presence of a stranger did not threaten or inhibit. Instead, it gave rise to feelings of respect, compassion and acceptance. In essence, *Ubuntu* made all people one another's keepers. Great value was put on hospitality in African society. Society was not individualistic and selfish but focused on helping the one in need. Hospitality was, in the words of David and Martin, 'a public duty toward strangers where the honor of the community was at stake and reciprocity was more likely to be communal rather than individual . . . ; hospitality . . . was a sacred duty' (1997: 501).

Hospitality involved ensuring that guests were protected from harm during their stay. Human life was held in great respect and human beings were to be protected from inhuman abuse. The proverbs referred to above show that strangers had rights and privileges that needed to be guaranteed and guarded. They also demonstrate that, in another sense, 'no one is a stranger. The world is our common home, the earth the property of us all. Because human life only exists by being shared, so all that is necessary for that life, for living and living well, is shared by the human family as a whole' (Connor, Decock and Hartin 1991: 189).

Despite all that has been said, one has to agree with Shack and Skinner when they point out that it 'would be romantic fantasy to suggest that prior to [the colonial and apartheid era] the receptivity to African strangers by their African

hosts was in every situation characteristically amicable and devoid of hostility. This is not so' (1979: 8). Among the amaXhosa, for example, all non-Xhosa speaking Africans who have not been assimilated are still referred to as *iintlanga* (other nations). This word has negative connotations. It emphasises and intensifies social distinctions among Africans. It has also acquired a derogatory meaning and is discriminatory. It refers to strangers as second-class people. They are seen as outsiders and as 'other', as their culture and language are different from the 'norm'. Just like the Jews of Israel, the amaXhosa see theirs as the essential nation and themselves the essential, or chosen, people. To be supremely human is to belong to their group. However, as Shack and Skinner point out, 'overt expression of such distinction through hostile acts never received official sanction' (1979: 41).

Outsiders, though labelled, were able to move with ease and entitled to hospitality and respect. One can see, however, that although *Ubuntu* is an important value, it is an ideal that is sometimes very difficult to fulfil. Nevertheless, the *Ubuntu* philosophy has managed to create a society that, according to Biko, is 'a true[ly] [hu]man-centred society whose sacred tradition is that of sharing' (1978: 46). Africans consider it important for someone to have *Ubuntu*; it is a sign of being and becoming a person.

NEGATIVE INFLUENCES ON *UBUNTU*

Ubuntu has been explained as a philosophical concept that engenders recognition of the humanity of other persons and hence promotes respect while challenging all to create a community that is caring, accepting and compassionate. The question arises why some South Africans are currently behaving, as during the recent xenophobic attacks on outsiders, as if this spiritual foundation no longer existed or was diminishing. One has to agree with Pityana when he states that moral virtues, values and obligations change. He writes:

The changing moral rules may not always be noticeable. They change even as those who abide by them insist that they are conservative. It is only that they do not notice. When they get noticed, there may be resistance. The very nature of morality, therefore, is that it is conservative because it seeks to preserve the structure of society (1999: 142).

Ubuntu, like all philosophies of life. These influences are not always gentle, have been threatened. It observes in this regard that kings and chiefs were the very

The following are of bastardisation' (1999: 46) an enduring value.

Colonisation

Through their generalisation that goes along with the basis of African society, colonialism, meaning exploitation, politics. This also led to the embodiment of the was 'judged to be inferior' to be so by the black people emphasise this point.

Colonialism, which but more fundamental practises of the indigenous were profoundly traditional needs

The era of colonisation and apartheid in South Africa

Apartheid

Apartheid was the government in 1948

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Apartheid was the policy introduced in South Africa by the National Party government in 1948. As a political policy it came to an end in 1994 after the

election of a democratic government. Although no longer entrenched in the statute books, its effects are still alive and continue to be felt today. For many years it dominated all spheres of South African life, political, economic, social and cultural. Racial domination, the exploitation of black people and the safeguarding of white supremacy and interest were apartheid's aims. Pityana is of the opinion that the purpose of the apartheid system was 'that Africans should have a doubtful sense of identity and self-respect; their cultural systems and values were subordinated and marginalised in the land of their birth. What this suggests is that it is possible for culture to be used for immoral ends' (Pityana 1999: 143).

Through this system the inherent dignity of black people was undermined. Blacks were made to look with wonder and awe at white values and achievements and despise their own way of life and its inherent principles. The policies, which involved practices such as migratory labour, forced removals and much worse, disrupted and almost destroyed the family structure and life of blacks. Family life is central to the education of children by parents in the values and norms of their society. Traditionally, this education took place in an environment '*apho kubantwana ebebephantsi kwabazali* (where children were under the strict control [of] . . . their parents . . .)' (Saulle 1996: 91). This characteristic of African life, along with other values, was undermined by apartheid.

Urbanisation

Deacon is of the opinion that *Ubuntu* currently exists 'mainly in South African rural areas, it being a value [that was] lost through the processes of urbanisation'. This is because in the urban context, the 'African person becomes entrenched in the reality of (western) Capitalism' (Deacon, Shutte and Smit 1999: 32, 35). With the advent of colonisation and apartheid, blacks were left with almost nothing, except the necessity of looking for employment from whites. Thus began the move away from families to 'greener pastures' in urban areas. This separation took its toll on African culture. Countless changes were triggered by the new exposure to western values. Through the process of acculturation, Africans began to adopt the way of life of those with whom they came into contact. Saulle also endorses this view when he says, 'European culture and new ideas . . . resulted in change in the people's lives and thinking' (1996: 84). This process reduced the effectiveness of African tribal life as a caring system for its members.

The struggle against

Attempts to overthrow the apartheid system threatened the values of the system. In the final years of the struggle, through such practices as the throwing of someone's neck and arms around the neck of someone being against the system, which man was recognised as the enemy.

In this situation, the competition for survival for human life were such actions as the carrying of the dead, were, in fact, its negation.

Because [*ubuntu*] can easily slight the interests of the majority for reasons. Kangaroo trials lends itself to the use of force from mass action.

One question is how far as claimed here. The individual and individual are not and neither working, also been argued that hence the charge of *asingabantu* (not human) that any destructive is a distorted sense. The were aberrations from motivated by good not clear what Biko battered nearly out (41). It is more appropriate but set aside in the

The struggle against apartheid

Attempts to overthrow the apartheid government at times undermined and threatened the values that the black majority was fighting to restore. For instance, in the final years of the struggle, the value of life was undermined and threatened through such practices as 'necklacing'. Necklacing (putting a burning tyre around someone's neck and burning him or her to death) was done to those perceived as being against the struggle for liberation. 'This was a time of desperation during which man was reduced to bestiality' (Sparks 1990: 103).

In this situation, 'Ubuntu took a back seat as more aggressive and abrasive competition for survival emerged' (1990: 59). Values such as compassion and respect for human life were severely dented. Deacon, Shutte and Smit mistakenly interpret such actions as the dark side of *Ubuntu*, whereas it is more accurate to say that they were, in fact, its negation. They write:

Because [ubuntu] seeks the greatest happiness for the greatest number, it can easily slight the rights of individuals. The majority may forget the interests of the minority. The solidarity of ubuntu may be for wrong reasons. Kangaroo courts and neck-lacing could be the result of this. It lends itself to intimidation. It is very hard [for one] to distance [one]self from mass action (1999: 24).

One questions how such practices could have possibly been inspired by *Ubuntu*, as claimed here. Part of the argument in this chapter has been that community and individual are mutually supportive – each operating in fulfilment of the other and neither working to suppress the other. This is what *Ubuntu* is all about. It has also been argued that acts that openly contradict the aims of *Ubuntu* negate it, hence the charge that those who perform such acts are not only inhuman but *asingabantu* (not human at all). It is a contradiction in terms, therefore, to claim that any destructive actions can be performed in advancement of *Ubuntu*, even in a distorted sense. The types of actions referred to by Deacon, Shutte and Smit were aberrations from *Ubuntu*, reflecting the actions of desperate people not motivated by good intentions but the desire for vengeance and destruction. It is not clear what Biko meant exactly when he said that *Ubuntu* 'may have been battered nearly out of shape by the belligerent [events] it collided with' (1978: 41). It is more appropriate to say that *Ubuntu* was at that time not in play at all but set aside in the interest of expediency.

CONCLUSION

Although not everything that pertains to the philosophy of *Ubuntu* has been covered in this chapter, it is clear that *Ubuntu* is a deep phenomenon and an essential condition of African life. It is a philosophy that has held society together through its beliefs and practices; a way of life which has put the person at the centre of all things. *Ubuntu* is centred on morality, and not in any way reflected by certain contemporary behaviour. The values of *Ubuntu* are concerned with both the character and behaviour of persons within the context of community.

Although *Ubuntu* is not easy to define, it is partly manifested through certain human acts, or a lack of inappropriate human acts. These acts are normally motivated by an inner disposition to do good, a condition that is a reflection of *Ubuntu*. One of the aims of *Ubuntu* is to conserve, develop and perfect the humanity of persons - to bring them to self-realisation. It is also concerned with human self-understanding, self-preservation and growth. The community has a role in accomplishing these goals through its participation in the shaping and defining of the human person. Recognition of one's humanity naturally leads to being accorded respect befitting one's nature as a human being. This respect endows the right to expect help when help is needed, protection, nourishment, compassion and love. These acts of humanity may be termed, loosely, human rights, rights for which one qualifies merely and precisely because one is a human person.

Traditionally, one's rights, to use the language of rights, were not understood simply as statements about entitlement, but also about responsibility and obligation towards others. *Ubuntu* accords priority to both duties and rights; both are inalienable from all persons. People in need thus have the right to be helped, while others have a duty and obligation to render services. This is not a matter of charity. It is an imperative based on the understanding that the presence of the other arouses feelings of respect, kindness, compassion and sacrifice. Individual responsibility is not absolved by group effort; group effort means that every single person has to demonstrate the principles of *Ubuntu*.

Participation in community either enhances or reduces an individual's self-respect or recognition as a person, depending on the kind of behaviour in which he or she engages. A person is, in effect, a person through what he or she does. One's actions make one either *umntu onobuntu* (a humane person) or *umntu ongenabuntu* (an inhumane person - without *Ubuntu*). A humane person is understood as a person who possesses good moral qualities and who puts them to good use.

Nothing could be clearer
'if people could become
caring society based
a 'special contribution
world a more human

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Nothing could be closer to the truth than the words of Broodryk, when he says: 'if people could become more ubuntu conscious, it should lead to a more ordered, caring society based on humanity' (1997: 61). *Ubuntu* would be what Biko terms a 'special contribution to the world in the field of human relations', 'giving the world a more human face' (1978: 47).

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Ubuntu as

In this chapter I shall
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