



Ubuntu Ideality: The Foundation of African Compassionate and Humane Living

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ABSTRACT

The 21st Century humanity is at the cross-road on where to get peace and peaceful society, despite all the resources at her disposal to make her world a peaceful one. Our survey reveals that the confusion is an outgrowth of jettisoning her traditional humane values under the guise of modernity. This has resulted into a system failure that has affects both our individual and corporate existence adversely. Therefore we are attuned to searching for answer to this state of imbalance that is eclipsing our psycho-spiritual/moral personality. In our inquest for answer, we stumbled at the 'Ubuntu' Ideality. Our study reveals that Ubuntu resembles a somewhat 'Holy-grail' that binds traditional African people together in an inseparable manner. It defines African philosophy of social/community living. The ideality takes different names under different African communities, however, in spite of the various names; the underling ideology is the same in all cultures. The central ideology is human-ness, cooperation, compassion and universal brotherhood of all mankind. Here Ubuntu ideality hinges on the basic truth that it is the community that defines the individual and gives people their worth-ness. Ubuntu reflects the deep spiritual truth that humanity share one indivisible essence-one spiritual essence, one planetary life system, one human race and one dependent human community. This paper therefore underscores that if the modern world will harness and adapt this pristine concept found in African traditional values, as a model of relationship that the crisis of the present order will be a history we will all remember with shame and regrets.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A critical survey of the 21st century world reveals an awful and threatening imagery to both our corporate and individual personalities /existences. The most overt picture that captures the attention of everyone is the sense of a general systemic breakdown that affects all peoples and nations adversely. The breakdown is both complex and holistic. Its complexity is predicated on the fact that no single reason could be adduced as its source. It is also holistic because it affects every sphere and realm of human existence. Therefore the modern man of all the races without exception seems to be condemned to the capriciousness of such modern phenomenon, without knowing where else to turn for salvation. We are confused and seem to be doomed as selfishness; individualism, competition etc. have taken over our corporate and personal values, resulting to crisis, conflicts, hatred, genocide, racial cleansing and wars at their varying degrees.

Against this backdrop of grim future for the 21st century humanity, Chaplin presents to us his million dollar searching questions in vivid terms thus, 'How do we rebuild the moral fabrics of the society that degenerated so much and where values have disappeared' [1]. It is in an attempt to proffer a plausible answer to Chaplin's questions and find hope for the modern generation that this paper betook its self to do a critical study on the theory and practice of African humane living in most of the African traditional communities. The paper spotlights that there is a somewhat *Holy Grail* that binds all persons of all African communities, regardless of social status, faith, clan etc. together in an inseparable manner. This *Holy Grail* defines in practical terms African philosophy of social/community living. This binding philosophy/force takes different names in different communities but their underlining philosophy is the same everywhere. Among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria it goes under the name, 'Ibuanindanda'. 'Ujamaa' is the synonymous term of Ibuanindanda among the people of East Africa, while Ubuntu, our major expository concern in this work is the term used among the people of South African. Ubuntu stands tall among the Bantu people of South Africa as its philosophy and foundation of community living. The central idea of these entwined terms is 'social solidarity' [2] In his contribution, Louw tied Ubuntu ideality to

spirituality and describes it as the spiritual foundation of all African societies, noting that Ubuntu is the unifying vision or worldview which articulates a basic respect and compassion for others [3,4].

This African philosophy of social living [Ubuntu] in their varying nomenclature/concepts and precepts is centered on the ideals of human worth, human-ness, community living, co-operation and compassion. Hence, Stoyko enunciates that Ubuntu is a collectivists, family-oriented and spiritual philosophy, which stresses that a person is less than a whole when acting in isolation instead of continually acknowledging the web of rich interconnection with others in a community, [I am a person through other persons] [5] Ubuntu is all about developing these relation in the spirit of universal brotherhood and sharing. Ubuntu therefore is a comprehensive, ancient African worldview, which pursues primary values of intense humanness of caring, sharing and compassion and associated values ensuring a happy and quality human community life in a family spirit or atmosphere. Those associated values include but not limited to truth, propriety, harmony, balance, reciprocity and order [6]. To this Broodryk adds: 'The Ubuntu personality is a reference to the ideal human being as it is manifested in the ancient Ubuntu values [7]. The ideal man or leader, who according to Ubuntu worldview possesses all these virtues of Ubuntu can be described as, a kind person, generous, living in harmony, friendly, modest, helpful, humble and happy' [8] Here the paper explores the practical essence and application of this philosophy of social living in everyday life of the African person in particular and global community in general.

2. UBUNTU: TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING

Nelson Mandela [the great African leader and Ubuntuist] in 2006 was asked to define Ubuntu as a concept and ideology in a video used to launch Ubuntu Linux. Here is his definition,

Ubuntu [U:bontu:/oo-BUUN-too, Zulu/Xhosa pronunciation 'Ubuntu' is an Nguni Bantu term which literally means 'human-ness' roughly translating to 'human roughness' . it is an idea from the South African region which means human-ness and is often translated as 'humanity towards others' but

is often used in more philosophical sense to mean the belief in universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity [9 see <http://www.wikipediafreeencyclopedia.org>]

Ubuntu can also be seen as both factual description and rule of social conduct or social ethics. It both describes human beings as, 'being –with-others' and consequently, prescribes what being-with-others should denote [10] Implicated in the above definition is the inclusive nature of human community. This also defines identities, nature, values and responsibilities of one towards another in a community. Therefore, the distinctive nature of Ubuntu is expressed in the imagery of the 'We' not 'me' the central notion of Ubuntu hinges on the idea of collectivity of the people rather than the individuality of person within a given community. The fundamental principle of Ubuntu is succinctly expressed in such Xhosa /Zulu idea as 'Umntu ngumntu ngabaye abantu' which literally translates, "people are people through other people or /and I am human because I belong to human community and I view and treat others accordingly [11].

Here Leopold Senghor, an African ethnographic philosopher, situates that the basic foundation of Ubuntu philosophy hinges on African family ideology. He underscores the fact that African understanding of family differs substantially from the Western understanding. According to him, African family is not restricted to father, mother and child, rather it embraces all persons sharing ancestral lineage. Thus African family system is described as a natural and spiritual union in which the living, dead and the unborn commune with each other in all its extended roots. In his own words:

The family in African is the clan and not as in Europe mum, dad and baby. It is not the household but the sum of all persons, living and dead, who acknowledge a common ancestor. As we know the ancestral lineage continues back to God [12,13]

It is this ideality that gave birth to the humane perspective of Ubuntu, which maintains that it is only in human community that we can and do fully know, experience and express ourselves as individuals. Here Ubuntu reflects the deep spiritual truth that we are one-one spiritual essence, one planetary life system, one human race and one interdependent human community. Thus our spiritual, moral, mental, social, physical

and economic bonds and mutual interdependence are inherently deep and tangible [14]. Tagore Rabindranath, an India Guru and Universalist had already underscore this pristine truth in his idea of 'universal consciousness', when he asserts

To be human is to try to go beyond oneself, to join with a greater sphere of life in sacrifice, love and friendship, men must find and feel and represent in all their creative work, men the external, the creator... for reality is the truth of men, who belong to all times, man is eager that his feelings for what is real to him must never die. Here it must find an imperishable form [15,16].

Ubuntu therefore is the essence of being human. In what Okoro describes as the African creed, 'I am because we are' Ubuntu presupposes that one's humanity is bound up in an intricate nature with the humanity of the other people in the community [16]. Ubuntu expresses the African philosophy of wholeness. This wholeness depicts a vision of a comprehensive and integrated wholeness which unites all things – human and none human- into one community through the vital force that knit all things in one [17] Buthelezi, a South African Theologian and Pastor explicated more on this African concept of wholeness or /and integrative nature of all things when he asserts;

It is often rightly been said that the Africans have a sense of wholeness of life. The traditional African religion was characterized by the motif of the wholeness of life...the continuity of fellowship between the living and the dead were analogous to the interplay between the natural and the supernatural worlds. Life was such a whole that not even death could disintegrate it [18].

Notably, Africans had a cosmic view of life and as such recognize that all beings that exist came into being through a common source [19]. Thus in African understanding, everything in the universe, everything from the simplest known particle of matter to the most complex of conceivable life form is simultaneously a whole in its own right and a mere part of something larger, wider and more encompassing and more whole. To understand the whole we need to understand the parts and to understand the parts we need an understanding of the whole [20,21]. Accordingly Samkange and Samkange gave a basic

interpretation of Ubuntu that may be relevant to our current work. Here they opine that Ubuntu could be interpreted within the province of three basic maxims as such:

1. Ubuntu asserts that to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and on that basis establish respectful human relations with them.
2. Ubuntu maintains that if and when one is faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being, then one should opt for the preservation of the life of the other person.
3. Ubuntu is a principle deeply embedded in the traditional African philosophy which maintains that the King owe his status including all the powers associated with it, to the will of the people under him [22].

This last point was highlighted by Nelson Mandela, the great African leader, the noble peace laureate and great Ubuntuist, when he observed the typical African village meeting and notes as follows:

Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been hierarchy of importance among the speakers but everyone was heard, chief, and subjects, warrior and medicine men, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and labourer. People spoke without interruption and the meeting lasted for many hours...At first, I was astonished by the vehemence and candor with which people criticized the regent. He was not above criticism. In fact, he was often the principle target of it. The regent simply listened not defending himself, showing no emotion at all [23].

It is in this regard that various terminologies/concepts have been used to describe the Ubuntu ideality in the modern times. Such terms and concepts include but not limited to the followings: sympathy, compassion, benevolence, solidarity, hospitality, generosity, sharing, openness, affirming, available, kindness, caring, harmony, interdependence, obedience, collectivity, consensus etc. Overtly, Ubuntu is in opposition to such practices as vengeance, confrontation, retribution etc. however it holds dignity, compassion, humanness and responsible

living as the proper definitions of human relationship in any given community.

4. Implications and practical Applications of Ubuntu to African Compassionate and Humane Living.

A true African socialist/humanist does not consider one class of men as his brethren and another class as his enemy. He/she does not form an alliance with his brethren for the extermination of the non-brethren but rather regard all human beings as members of an extended family [24].

On the strength of the assertion above, Nanda states, citing Nelson Mandela, the great African leader and Ubuntuist as saying, 'I have always known that deep down in every heart there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin or his background or his religion [25]. It is against the backdrop of the following assumptions that the concept of Ubuntu receives its hermeneutical discourse. Here the general African understanding which defines the place of Ubuntu as an African philosophy of humane living is that it is the society and not any transcendent being that bequeaths human being their humanity [see www.wikipediafreeencyclopediaonafricanphilosophy.org].

This idea is practically exemplified by the Bantu people, who when communicating in Zulu language will always enjoin his neighbor in the following words, 'Khulumaisintu' which literally means 'speak the language of the people' and whenever someone behaves according to custom, the Bantu man will commend him/her by saying, 'kemotho' which means, 'he /she is human, while the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria will say, 'ibummadu' meaning, 'you are a human being or 'osinaezinauloputa' meaning he/she came from a home or he/she has a good family upbringing. This idea gave birth to the popular idiom among many African communities, 'one is an animal but two is a community'. One common denominator in all our examples above is that, humanity comes through conforming to or being part of the community. On this score, Eze writes:

A person is a person through other people strikes an affirmation of one's humanity through the recognition of an 'other' in his or her uniqueness and difference. It is a demand for a creative intersubjective formation in which the, 'other' becomes a

mirror [but only as a mirror] for my subjectivity. This idealism suggests to us that humanity is not embedded in my person solely as an individual; my humanity is co-substantively bestowed upon each other. We create each other and need to sustain this otherness creation. And if we belong to each other, we participate in our common creation; we are because you are and since you are, definitely I am. The 'I am' is not a rigid subject but a dynamic self-constitution dependent on this otherness creation of relation and distance [26].

The implication of above long citation which explicitly defines the basic hermeneutical understanding of Ubuntu is that Africans define themselves within the community of other people and not just as individuals/atoms within a community, hence the African idioms such as, 'your pain is my pain' 'my wealth is your wealth'; 'my salvation is your salvation'. It is this notion that makes the individual to be rooted in the community that one's personal identity is defined by what you give to the community. This idea is expressed in Shona greeting. [Shona is another popular indigenous language of South Africans]. Good morning, did you sleep well? The reply will always be, yes I slept well if you slept well. How has your day been? My day has been good, since your day own is good [27]. The basic African philosophy of social/ humane living hinges on the idea that we are so connected with the other person that if he does not sleep well or he is not having a good day, then the entire community to which he belongs will neither sleep well nor have a good day. Thus the Igbo adage, '*Anya bewe aru dum ebewekwa*' which literally means, if the eye begins to cry the whole body joins in tandem. [What affects one affects all].

The practical application of these greeting is not restricted to members of the same community, it also extends to the strangers one meets on the road. This gives impetus to the maxim, "I am what I am because of you" which aims at laying foundation for the establishment of basic norm of respect, empathy and compassion for other people, relations or strangers. Hence the general aphorism, 'An injury done to one person [human being] is an injury done to all humanity. This idea re-enforces community sentiments. Thus Ubuntu ideality inspires us to open ourselves to other people, to learn more about ourselves through knowing other people. Thus a person who has really cultivated the spirit of Ubuntu is always open and available to other people. He affirms and respects other people and does not feel

threatened by the strengths and abilities of the other person. This is because he/she recognizes that we all belong to the greater whole. Holism as an integral part of African philosophy of social living, which has become core tenet of Ubuntu has been expounded by Okoro, when he asserts that all lives within the planetary system are part and parcel of the whole and interlocks in unitary web of existence [28].

Ubuntu ideality considers all humanity as belonging to one single family and as such there is no discrimination in its practice. Thus in traditional African society, travelers were not required to carry provisions on their journey. What he must necessarily do was to dress properly and be on the road. The spirit of Ubuntu mandates Africans to provide for and protect the stranger in every home he enters, Africans are mandated by the spirit and practice of Ubuntu to make their guest comfortable without any material costs, while the guests are required to display humanity to his/her host. This is expressed in the Igbo adage thus, '*O biara be onye a biagbulaya, o lawa ka mkpukpu azu ghara ipuya*' meaning, 'while a stranger is treated with hospitality and humanity, the stranger should demonstrate candor and gratitude so as to avoid the wrath of the ancestors/spirit, who was ready to give the ungrateful guest hunchback as a reward for his ingratitude. The hospitality and protection is not a reserve of the main person that is playing host to the visitor rather it is a requirement for any person that is aware of the presence of a visitor in the community.

The spirit of Ubuntu also receives practical applications in all social/filial relationships. Therefore, it is a taboo to call elderly people by their first names rather they are called by their family names or titles. Hence among the Igbo people you have such names/titles as Ichie, Ozo, Ojiefi, Osuji, Onyibe, Osunankata, Omeregu, dede, adaanyi, nnem/nnam, nwanem etc. Gade notes the implications of such practice as having the ability of banishing individualism and replacing it with a representative role, in which the individual effectively stands for the people [29] see also www.wikipediafreeencyclopedia.org. In the spirit of Ubuntu, the individual identity is subsumed in the larger social identity. Accordingly, families are depicted in the individual and such norm extends to the village and to the wider community also. This norm places responsibility on the individual to behave in the highest

standard and demonstrate highest virtue the society strives for. Here Ubuntu embodies all the invaluable virtues that the society strives towards maintaining harmony and the spirit of sharing among its members [see www.wikipediafreencyclopedia.org].

Another key concepts associated with Ubuntu is stipulation on how to behave in various social roles. Ubuntu norms expect the daughter-in-laws as a sign of respect and also as part of their ambassadorial roles, to kneel down while serving food to their parents-in-laws. While playing this role, she is showing the type of home training she received. This norm however, does not only apply to the daughters-in-laws alone but to the women in general. As a mark of respect, which Ubuntu represents, the women are expected to humbly greet their relatives, the elderly in the community. This does not denote subjugation of the womenfolk but considered as part of respect and training one cultivates by acquiring Ubuntu. [Here a non-African may see this practice as gender discrimination and injustice on the part of the female folk but that is simply a misunderstanding of African culture. In African society, the culture assigns duties/obligations relevant to one's age and perhaps social status. This makes for the smooth running of the society, however, every age and social status have a respect attached to it, so the women and the young people are demand in some cases in Traditional African society, as a mark of respect to bow while greeting the elderly people and this attracts blessings from the gods and the ancestor. In fact it may be necessary here to underscore the fact that in some African societies [among the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria] for example, the young people of all the sexes are expected to prostrate while greeting the elderly ones, whether a man or a woman] On the side of the male members of the community, more physical demands of responsibilities are placed on them by Ubuntu norms as their own contribution to the smooth running of the society

Generally, in any African community, children were never orphans. This is informed by the fact that the roles of mother and father are by definition not vested in any single individual with respect to a single child. This ideality was practically demonstrated in this story told me by one of the members of my congregation some time ago. Mr. Okoye, as we were sharing our experiences on the nature of African humane living, spotlighting on both its positive and negative natures, Okoye, underscoring the positive nature of African humane living told me

that he was one of the beneficiaries of such gesture. He said that his mother died while delivering him, on discovering that he has the potentiality of surviving, the nursing mothers in the community, immediately gathered and made a schedule on-turn-breast feeding for him and these they did for about one year when he began to be fully sustained by adult food.

Ubuntu ideality also constitutes the seed of African jurisprudence. Here a crime committed by one individual on another extends beyond the two persons involved and has a far reaching implications to the entire community or communities of the persons involved. Notably, African social justice tends to uphold remedies as well as punishments that aim at bringing the people together in a mutual and harmonious community living. A practical demonstration of this ideality most often done in relation to murder crimes. Murder crimes in most non-African society leads to the execution of the offender but in African society it will rather lead to the creation of bonds of marriage by the families of the victim and the murderer. Okoro expounds on this practice when he notes;

In conflict resulting to bloodshed in the traditional society, the custom requires that serious pacifying steps be taken to broker peace between the two warring clans. This traditional ceremony known as 'blood money reparation' was organized between the two clans/families. In this ceremony, marriage involving the two clans was conducted...the aim of the marriage was to heal the wounds of the war and cement relationship between the warring communities. The general cliché among the Igbo people of Nigeria is, where the blood is shed, it must be soaked with birth fluid [30].

The practice of Ubuntu could be seen in all realms of African life and could also be harnessed for the benefit of all humanity in the contemporary world. Underscoring the global relevance of Ubuntu [The African philosophy of humane living] Steve Biko opines that 'the great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look but the great still has to come from Africa-giving the world a more human face' [31]. The power of Ubuntu has the capacity to promote harmony within any society, whether traditional or modern. Here, Mbigi and Meree explicate on this aspect of Ubuntu using the Finger theory. According to them, the thumb can only work effectively with the cooperation and collectivity of other fingers

[32,33]. The implication of the above theory is that one needs a collective forum, which is inclusive for nature to operate freely and optimally. Nelson Mandela in his autobiography, "long Walk to Freedom" published in 1995 and revised in 1996, echoes this assumption, when he observes that in a typical African village meeting everyone was free to voice his/her opinions and are equal in their values as citizens [32]. Ubuntu, which is a practical demonstration of brotherhood is therefore characterized by effective cooperation and team work. Broodryk underscores the global relevance of Ubuntu philosophy as he maintains that the ideology has already influenced major management practice in the western world. Here he enunciates that the following Ubuntu characteristics square with western management techniques. These are

- Competence [here everyone brings something the team needs]
- Clear and compelling goals
- Commitment to common goal
- Every member contributes
- Everyone benefits
- Supportive environment is created
- Alignment becomes possible [34,32].

With these essential elements, Ubuntu aims at creating in a community, the "We" feeling-which Broodryk maintains is conducive to social cohesiveness], noting that the "We" feeling encourages everyone in the community to completely identify with the rest of the people in the community. This generates the sense of belonging, security and certainty [35]. The "We" feeling creates camaraderie and this reveals the oneness of all the people in this popular African saying, "you touch one, you touch all" [32,36]. Thus in the spirit of Ubuntu, citizens cultivate the spirit of patriotism and this is a core force in building a virile and humane society. Ubuntu norms demand on all people the practical demonstration of cooperation and mutuality [37]. Therefore, through Ubuntu, the nations of the world that are suffering from systemic breakdown could be rebuilt.

3. CONCLUSION

According to Desmond Tutu, The astute pastor and renowned Black Theologian, Ubuntu is the core of African ontology and also symbolizes the backbone of African Spirituality. And it has become African contributions to the world development. If this African gift is harnessed it

has the capacity to rebuild our broken world. To harness it, Ubuntu principle should be inculcated into the educational curriculum at all levels and peace educator shall make Ubuntu Ideality part of their scheme in training for peace. I will conclude this paper with this illustrative story told by Rapelang Rabana thus:

A journalist was assigned to the Lebanon beat. Walking through the bombed-out street of Beirut one day, he heard some beautiful music coming from a doorway. He wandered over to where the music was being played and there he saw a lad playing flute. The music was beautiful, but the flute was the weirdest looking instrument of music he had ever seen. He got as close as he could properly get when the lad stopped playing and smiled and handed him the instrument. It was not until he pick up the flute did the journalist understand. For what this young Lebanese boy had done was to find in some field a discarded rifle bore holes in the barrel of the rifle and transform a gun into a flute [14].

Therefore, if the global community will remake their instruments of war into instruments of peace, joy and celebration by cultivating the spirit of Ubuntu, then our world will begin to hear a new rhythm that will assure the global citizen of hope and future. Ubuntu spirit will create in us a deep sense of being connected to the others of our common humanity and through that means bridges will be built against human divisions and separatedness. This will inspire a deep sense of regard of our self as part of the other selves and we begin to cherish human dignity at all levels of relationship. When we understand and practice Ubuntu, we will realize that each of us has a role to play, which must be held in balance, not dominating the other. Thus we must break the walls and build body up and bring people together. This is the Ubuntu demand for all.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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