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## African Renaissance and Ubuntu

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## INTRODUCTION

Ubuntu and African Renaissance share a resonance of being weighty subjects which address fundamental and often ignored aspects of African development. At the same time, these concepts seem hopelessly vague, being used by everybody in a way that fits him or her best. So, seemingly, it would be advisable for academics to rather ignore such concepts altogether. Relevance and academic acceptability seem to be at odds here. However, academics should not be too parochial. Vague and ambiguous notions are widely and profitably used in many areas of social and professional life. Vagueness may even be an asset for key focalising and mobilising notions. A non-parochial approach would suggest that we take a serious look at the roles that the ideas of Ubuntu and African Renaissance fulfil in various fields of human activity. Concepts receive their meaning in practical use, as Wittgenstein taught us; these concepts may have diverse and inspiring uses. An open, broadminded but nevertheless critical approach is called for.

An attempt at such critical openness was the international seminar on "African Renaissance and Ubuntu Philosophy" at the University of Groningen in May 2001. The present collection of papers results from this event. The seminar tried to relate a philosophical explication of the concepts African Renaissance and Ubuntu to the practical uses of these concepts in some real-life situations, ranging from South Africa's international activism for a plan to develop the African continent, via public life in South Africa and African business management innovation, to slum-dwellers' self-organisation in home-town associations and credit groups.

The result of this 'reflective inventory', as presented in the papers of this collection, will not be summarised in this introduction. Rather, it is attempted to put forward some provisional conclusions; conclusions not about the value of African Renaissance and Ubuntu philosophy as such, but about different strands in the discussion, key dilemma's and blind spots, as well as promises embodied in these ideas.

To begin with, the concepts African Renaissance and Ubuntu seem to function in at least two quite distinct worlds. One is political and administrative, where they are explicitly forward-looking ideas to inspire and legitimate the bold development efforts of the new South Africa. The other is cultural and philosophical, where these concepts refer to past and present African life-forms as a foundation for not just development, but African development. The meaning, the users, the contexts of application and the 'politics' of these concepts in both worlds are so different that there often seems to be only a thin line connecting them.

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The political use of the concepts focuses on issues of modernisation and liberation of the continent rather than on 'deep' cultural issues. For instance, when Mbeki states "I am an African" then he tries to avoid references to racial and cultural essences (although his listeners may pick up a different message). And the word "renaissance" itself is hardly made to refer to the rebirth of so-called traditional Africa, i.e. to a particularly African heritage that needs to be revived. It rather refers to a new Africa to be built upon the various heritages that come together in African reality today.

The most direct complications of the political concept of African Renaissance are political themselves. Two such complications stand out. Firstly, the self-appointed role of South Africa as vanguard and spokesperson for the whole continent. Such a role may be logical for the country that is strongest on the continent in many respects, but is it justified, is it appreciated, and can it be expected to succeed? Secondly, Mbeki may replicate mistakes made by African leaders in the 1970s who formulated 'national philosophies'. Such philosophies consistently turned out to be a legitimating ideology for the new ruling elite rather than philosophies that could survive the leaders who formulated them. How can the idea of an African Renaissance avoid such a fate?

The pages of the present collection trace some interesting aspects of this 'politics' of African Renaissance and Ubuntu. Thabo Mbeki's "I am an African" and Pricilla Jana's spirited introduction to the Millennium Action Plan show the strong humanitarian and progressive inspiration of African Renaissance. As a political project for the collective uplift of the continent it compares with the determined strivings of the first leaders of African independence in the 1960s, such as Nnamdi Azikiwe and Kwame Nkrumah, for what they called a "New Africa". The article in this collection "Discourse of African Renaissance in African Intellectual History" retraces some of these connections and delves into the problem of spokespersonship of mission-statements for Africa. One can ask: Who speaks? On behalf of whom? And with whose's mandate? Even in the specific case of South Africa these questions are not misplaced. The actual resonance of the concepts of African Renaissance and Ubuntu in daily communication in South Africa seems to be limited. As the contribution to this collection "The Agenda of African Renaissance – Modernisation, Traditionalisation or Africanisation" notes, the idea of African Renaissance fares much better at the higher levels of national and international politics - and that of Ubuntu in business management circles – than in the public sphere, in pubs and in debates among friends. They fail, as yet, to raise the heated debates that questions of class, race or revolution raised twenty years ago.

The value within South Africa of the ideas of African Renaissance and Ubuntu may lie especially at the national level, in reconfirming the identity and

overall ambitions of the post-Apartheid state as focussed upon African emancipation, non-racialism, humanism and social justice. They can be considered examples of time-tested African ‘technologies of sociability’, as is noted in the article in this collection "Ubuntu and the Globalisation of African Thought". Such notions, then, function as instruments to overcome differences, and reconcile by creative redefinitions of identity; they can create a new moral community.

It is as yet unclear if the ‘technology of sociability’ will actually work in the case of present-day South Africa. From the point of view of the national leadership, the situation may command something like an ‘obligation to be optimistic’ in this regard. However, such may also have been the inspiration of Julius Nyerere when he implemented his idea of Ujamaa. Looking back at the Tanzanian experience, as is done in this collection in the article "Ujamaa, a Phantom", shows the possible pitfalls of such a view. Among these pitfalls are overestimating the possible impact of the proclaimed philosophy on the actual life of the people, and the legitimising role of the philosophy for the emerging new elite. Whatever lessons there may be learned from these experiences, a prominent one must be the need for continued open and critical assessments of ideas, and actual results of policies; the need for a political culture that is able to raise vital questions, expose where necessary, and correct. Particularly at this point South Africa may be taking a different course from most of its African predecessors. In these countries political leaders choose for (and effectively enforced) a political closure and control by the state of the public space. South Africa's open political culture is a vital asset for the success of an African Renaissance.

\* \* \*

The second, cultural use of the concepts African Renaissance and Ubuntu is especially challenging from an academic point of view. On the one hand, the concepts here highlight valuable aspects of African ways of life, principles and ideas that are often overlooked or ignored. Such indigenous cultural resources may be essential to build a solid development in Africa from indigenous 'roots'. Moreover, the message of the concepts goes far beyond utilitarian issues of "development" and touches on the very question of what it is to be an African. African Renaissance and Ubuntu are here a praise song, so to say, affirming an African identity in today's world. On the other hand, the cultural use of African Renaissance and Ubuntu carries a deeply critical message; it is also a battle cry. The simple act of putting forward these African ideas is an act of defining a counter-position to dominant 'Western' conceptions of development, of modernity, and of life as such.

As a battle cry, African Renaissance and Ubuntu hold all the promises of a non-western tradition that has been misread and marginalised in history, but that reclaims its place. The idea of a universal “modernity”, as the predefined horizon

for all of humanity, has lost most of its self-evidence over the past decades. The playing ground is in principle open now for other traditions to conceive of their modernity and to reassess their history and cultural resources in view of the historical challenges that they are confronted with. Ubuntu and African Renaissance represent the self-conscious African player on this post-modernity playing field. In this field they are not simply present in a neutral way. They are positioned, and position themselves, relative to others, in particular relative to dominant ideas from the West. The texts themselves tend to be structured in a bipolar way, namely by explaining what WE are by making a contrast with how THEY are. The bipolar order has its sociological aspects as well. The battle cry is most prominent where it serves identity politics in situations of social, cultural or racial polarisation. South Africa itself, as well as the USA, can serve as examples here.

As a praise song African Renaissance and Ubuntu are somewhat less situation-bound than in their role as critic. They connect to a history of over a century of intellectual and artistic endeavours to put Africa on a global cultural map dominated by Europe. Africans were not alone in such endeavours. Europeans in the tradition of the Romantic, from Mary Kingsley and the “Friends of Africa” in the early twentieth century till present-day critics of modernity and Enlightenment, share this urge to go back to the true African sources.

African Philosophy is one of the fields in which Ubuntu and African Renaissance are important instruments of cultural self-assertion. The classical debate in African philosophy between ‘academic’ or ‘modern’ philosophy and ‘ethnophilosophy’ is not so much about whether African philosophy should have roots in Africa; both sides agree on this. The contested question is whether the roots of African philosophy should consist of a direct cultural continuation of indigenous African traditions or consist of critical work concerned with Africa issues and practised by Africans. A number of African philosophers, such as Henry Odera Orika, Kwasi Wiredu, and in this volume Dirk Louw, show that interesting intermediate courses can be followed between these two extremes. However, the pitfalls of one of the extremes, that of ethnophilosophy, are not easily avoided by a cultural discourse on African Renaissance or Ubuntu. This is shown by even a quick reading of the average text on Ubuntu that one finds when entering this term in the Google internet search machine (or a reading of texts in the tradition of Afrocentrism, for that matter). The pitfalls include the making of many empirical statements about African cultures without reference to empirical data, a lack of attention to the diversity of African cultures and processes of cultural change, and a tendency to table superficial stereotypes of both Africa and of its ‘other’ – Europe.

When such weaknesses are avoided, then the most interesting discussions of African Renaissance and Ubuntu emerge. This is often the case when the agenda of

a study is not simply to present the African culture to the reader, but when the agenda is to deal with contemporary problems from an African point of view. An excellent example of such a text is Kwasi Wiredu's defence of the basic principles of African consensus democracy for democracy today in his article "Democracy and Consensus: A Plea for a Non-Party Polity."<sup>1</sup> In this collection, the article "Ubuntu as a Management Concept" represents the same open-minded focus on contemporary problems.

In short, whether it concerns the 'political' or the 'cultural' discourses on African Renaissance and Ubuntu, the key to fruitful use of these concepts seems to lie in critical debate and creative elaboration of African traditions. Here a "renaissance" is called for in a specific sense. In the European renaissance period the ambition of culture-makers was not to simply reinstate classical values, classical themes and classical ideals, but to surpass them. The promise of an African Renaissance may lie not in a fixation on African heritages as such, but in the ambition to re-appropriate them critically and creatively and so surpass them.

This collection on African Renaissance and Ubuntu Philosophy appears as a special issue of the African journal of Philosophy QUEST, in collaboration with the Department of Philosophy of the University of the North in South Africa and the Centre for Development Studies of the University of Groningen. The international seminar that was at the basis of this publication was organised by the Centre of Development Studies in collaboration with the Dutch-Flemish Association for Intercultural Philosophy and the Dutch Association for African Studies. The editors would like to thank the authors of this collection, in particular the honourable ambassador Priscilla Jana for her participation in the seminar and her paper, and the President of the Republic of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, for permission to reprint his seminal statement on African Renaissance.

Pieter Boele van Hensbroek  
Editor

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<sup>1</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, "Democracy and Consensus: A Plea for a Non-Party Polity" in K. Wiredu, *Cultural universals and particulars*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1996)





# I AM AN AFRICAN

**Thabo Mbeki**

*Statement on behalf of the African National Congress on the occasion of the adoption by the Constitutional Assembly of The Republic of South Africa Constitution Bill 1996, Cape Town, 8 May 1996*

ON AN OCCASION such as this we should, perhaps, start from the beginning.

So let me begin.

I am an African.

I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the everchanging seasons that define the face of our native land.

My body has frozen in our frosts and in our latter-day snows. It has thawed in the warmth of our sunshine and melted in the heat of the midday sun.

The crack and the rumble of the summer thunders, lashed by startling lightning, have been causes both of trembling and of hope.

The fragrances of nature have been as pleasant to us as the sight of the wild blooms of the citizens of the veld.

The dramatic shapes of the Drakensberg, the soil-coloured waters of the Lekoa, iGqili noThukela, and the sands of the Kgalagadi have all been panels of the set on the natural stage on which we act out the foolish deeds of the theatre of our day.

At times, and in fear, I have wondered whether I should concede equal citizenship of our country to the leopard and the lion, the elephant and the springbok, the hyena, the black mamba and the pestilential mosquito.

A human presence among all these, a feature on the face of our native land thus defined, I know that none dare challenge me when I say: I am an African!

I owe my being to the Khoi and the San whose desolate souls haunt the great expanses of the beautiful Cape - they who fell victim to the most merciless genocide our native land has ever seen, they who were the first to lose their lives in the struggle to defend our freedom and independence and they who, as a people, perished in the result.

Today, as a country, we keep an audible silence about these ancestors of the generations that live, fearful to admit the horror of a former deed, seeking to obliterate from our memories a cruel occurrence which, in its remembering, should teach us not and never to be inhuman again.

I am formed of the migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land. Whatever their own actions, they remain still part of me.

In my veins courses the blood of the Malay slaves who came from the East. Their proud dignity informs my bearing, their culture is part of my essence. The stripes they bore on their bodies from the lash of the slavemaster are a reminder embossed on my consciousness of what should not be done.

I am the grandchild of the warrior men and women that Hintsa and Sekhukhune led, the patriots that Cetshwayo and Mphephu took to battle, the soldiers Moshoeshe and Ngungunyane taught never to dishonour the cause of freedom.

My mind and my knowledge of myself is formed by the victories that are the jewels in our African crown, the victories we earned from Isandhlwana to Khartoum, as Ethiopians and as the Ashanti of Ghana, as the Berbers of the desert.

I am the grandchild who lays fresh flowers on the Boer graves at St Helena and the Bahamas, who sees in the mind's eye and suffers the suffering of a simple peasant folk: death, concentration camps, destroyed homesteads, a dream in ruins.

I am the child of Nongause. I am he who made it possible to trade in the world markets in diamonds, in gold, in the same food for which my stomach yearns.

I come of those who were transported from India and China, whose being resided in the fact, solely, that they were able to provide physical labour, who taught me that we could both be at home and be foreign, who taught me that human existence itself demanded that freedom was a necessary condition for that human existence.

Being part of all these people, and in the knowledge that none dare contest that assertion, I shall claim that I am an African!

I have seen our country torn asunder as these, all of whom are my people, engaged one another in a titanic battle, the one to redress a wrong that had been caused by one to another, and the other to defend the indefensible.

I have seen what happens when one person has superiority of force over another, when the stronger appropriate to themselves the prerogative even to annul the injunction that God created all men and women in His image.

I know what it signifies when race and colour are used to determine who is human and who subhuman.

I have seen the destruction of all sense of self-esteem, the consequent striving to be what one is not, simply to acquire some of the benefits which those who had imposed themselves as masters had ensured that they enjoy.

I have experience of the situation in which race and colour is used to enrich some and impoverish the rest.

I have seen the corruption of minds and souls as a result of the pursuit of an ignoble effort to perpetrate a veritable crime against humanity.

I have seen concrete expression of the denial of the dignity of a human being emanating from the conscious, systemic and systematic oppressive and repressive activities of other human beings.

There the victims parade with no mask to hide the brutish reality - the beggars, the prostitutes, the street children, those who seek solace in substance abuse, those who have to steal to assuage hunger, those who have to lose their sanity because to be sane is to invite pain.

Perhaps the worst among these who are my people are those who have learnt to kill for a wage. To these the extent of death is directly proportional to their personal welfare.

And so, like pawns in the service of demented souls, they kill in furtherance of the political violence in KwaZulu-Natal. They murder the innocent in the taxi wars. They kill slowly or quickly in order to make profits from the illegal trade in narcotics. They are available for hire when husband wants to murder wife and wife, husband.

Among us prowl the products of our immoral and amoral past - killers who have no sense of the worth of human life; rapists who have absolute disdain for the women of our country; animals who would seek to benefit from the vulnerability of the children, the disabled and the old; the rapacious who brook no obstacle in their quest for self-enrichment.

All this I know and know to be true because I am an African!

Because of that, I am also able to state this fundamental truth: that I am born of a people who are heroes and heroines.

I am born of a people who would not tolerate oppression.

I am of a nation that would not allow that fear of death, torture, imprisonment, exile or persecution should result in the perpetuation of injustice.

The great masses who are our mother and father will not permit that the behaviour of the few results in the description of our country and people as barbaric. Patient because history is on their side, these masses do not despair because today the weather is bad. Nor do they turn triumphalist when, tomorrow, the sun shines. Whatever the circumstances they have lived through - and because of that experience - they are determined to define for themselves who they are and who they should be.

We are assembled here today to mark their victory in acquiring and exercising their right to formulate their own definition of what it means to be African.

The Constitution whose adoption we celebrate constitutes an unequivocal statement that we refuse to accept that our Africanness shall be defined by our race, colour, gender or historical origins.

It is a firm assertion made by ourselves that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white.

It gives concrete expression to the sentiment we share as Africans, and will defend to the death, that the people shall govern.

It recognises the fact that the dignity of the individual is both an objective which society must pursue, and is a goal which cannot be separated from the material wellbeing of that individual.

It seeks to create the situation in which all our people shall be free from fear, including the fear of the oppression of one national group by another, the fear of the disempowerment of one social echelon by another, the fear of the use of state power to deny anybody their fundamental human rights, and the fear of tyranny.

It aims to open the doors so that those who were disadvantaged can assume their place in society as equals with their fellow human beings without regard to colour, race, gender, age or geographic dispersal.

It provides the opportunity to enable each one and all to state their views, promote them, strive for their implementation in the process of governance without fear that a contrary view will be met with repression.

It creates a law-governed society which shall be inimical to arbitrary rule.

It enables the resolution of conflicts by peaceful means rather than resort to force.

It rejoices in the diversity of our people and creates the space for all of us voluntarily to define ourselves as one people.

As an African, this is an achievement of which I am proud, proud without reservation and proud without any feeling of conceit.

Our sense of elevation at this moment also derives from the fact that this magnificent product is the unique creation of African hands and African minds. But it also constitutes a tribute to our loss of vanity that we could, despite the temptation to treat ourselves as an exceptional fragment of humanity, draw on the accumulated experience and wisdom of all humankind to define for ourselves what we want to be.

Together with the best in the world, we too are prone to pettiness, petulance, selfishness and short-sightedness. But it seems to have happened that we looked at ourselves and said the time had come that we made a superhuman effort to be other than human, to respond to the call to create for ourselves a glorious future, to remind ourselves of the Latin saying: *Gloria est conse9uenda* - *Glory* must be sought after!

Today it feels good to be an African.

It feels good that I can stand here as a South African and as a foot soldier of a titanic African army, the African National Congress, to say to all It feels good that I can stand here as a South African and as a foot soldier of a titanic African army, the African National Congress, to say to all processes we are concluding, to our outstanding compatriots who have presided over the birth of our founding document, to the negotiators who pitted their wits one against the other, to the stars who shone unseen as the management and administration of the Constitutional

Assembly, the advisers, experts and publicists, to the mass communication media, to our friends across the globe: Congratulations and well done!

I am an African.

I am born of the peoples of the continent of Africa.

The pain of the violent conflict that the peoples of Liberia, Somalia, the Sudan, Burundi and Algeria experience is a pain I also bear.

The dismal shame of poverty, suffering and human degradation of my continent is a blight that we share.

The blight on our happiness that derives from this and from our drift to the periphery of the ordering of human affairs leaves us in a persistent shadow of despair.

This is a savage road to which nobody should be condemned.

This thing that we have done today, in this small corner of a great continent that has contributed so decisively to the evolution of humanity, says that Africa rearms that she is continuing her rise from the ashes.

Whatever the setbacks of the moment, nothing can stop us now!

Whatever the difficulties, Africa shall be at peace!

However improbable it may sound to the sceptics, Africa will prosper!

Whoever we may be, whatever our immediate interest, however much we carry baggage from our past, however much we have been caught by the fashion of cynicism and loss of faith in the capacity of the people, let us say today: Nothing can stop us now!



# UBUNTU AND THE CHALLENGES OF MULTICULTURALISM IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

Dirk J. Louw

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu.*<sup>2</sup> *Motho ke motho ka batho.* These are, respectively, the Zulu<sup>3</sup> and Sotho versions of a traditional African aphorism, often translated as: "a person is a person through other persons" (Ramose, 1999:49f; Shutte, 1993:46). Its central concept, "Ubuntu",<sup>4</sup> means "humanity", "humanness", or even "humaneness". These translations involve a considerable loss of culture-specific meaning. But, be that as it may, generally speaking, the maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* articulates a basic respect and compassion for others.<sup>5</sup> As such, it is both a factual description and a rule of conduct or social ethic. It not only describes human being as "being-with-others", but also prescribes how we should relate to others, i.e. what "being-with-others" should be all about. The 1997 South African Governmental White Paper on Social Welfare officially recognises Ubuntu as:

The principle of caring for each other's well-being...and a spirit of mutual support...Each individual's humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through a recognition of the individual's humanity. 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. (<<http://www.gov.za/whitepaper/index.html>>).<sup>6</sup>

It was my privilege, as fellow of the *Expertisecentrum Zuidelijk Afrika* (EZA), to teach a course on African Philosophy and a course on Ubuntu Philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy of Utrecht University during the first semester of 2001. In many respects the latter course followed on the former and, as such, it explored the concept of Ubuntu within a variety of contexts, e.g. religion, politics, law, the business world, education, health-care, gender, globalisation, etc. This proved to be an exciting way of coming to grips with this somewhat elusive concept. Unfortunately, we cannot engage in such a comprehensive exercise here. Instead, we shall embark on a, for me equally exciting, exploration of Ubuntu as a response to multi-culturalism, with specific reference to South Africa.

The decolonisation of Africa, of which the dismantling of apartheid serves as a prominent recent example, led to a greater acknowledgement of the plurality of cultures on its soil. "Plurality of cultures" here not only refers to racial and ethnic variety, but also to other overlapping affinity groups that constitute African, and



specifically South African, society. Categories (that is, besides race or ethnicity) which may assist one in discerning these overlapping groups include *inter alia* language, religion, class (or income), gender, sexual orientation, age, ability/disability, literate/illiterate, urbanised/non-urbanised, and perhaps even the somewhat controversial categories premodern, modern, and post-modern. It is not my intention to indulge in a quantification of this complexity here. (The quantification of this complexity is, in any event, very difficult.) The fact that we have eleven official languages should bring home the realization that, as a reference to South African society, “plural” is spelt with a capital “p”. However, one statistic is significant for the purposes of this paper – given the assumption that Ubuntu originated in traditional, indigenous African societies. About 60% of the black population in South Africa are non-urbanised (and about 76% of the total population are black). Many members of these non-urbanised communities, who are largely unexposed to modern (industrialised, Western) culture, are completely illiterate (about 10% of South African adults have had no education in the Western sense of the word at all). And many of them still adhere to the customs of their tribe or larger ethnic grouping. Not that urbanised blacks do not adhere to these customs. Some of them still do or try to, especially those in the ever-growing squatter settlements outside major cities (Van der Merwe, 1996:2-4; Goduka & Swadener, 1999:46-47).

When faced with this plurality of cultures, people often resort to either absolutism or relativism in their assessment of others. The absolutist dogmatically and arbitrarily evaluates the other in view of criteria with which the latter does not identify him-/herself. It is thus expected of the other to submit to a colonising hegemony (i.e. enforced homogeneity) of norms and values. The other is assumed to be nothing but an extension of the assessor's self, more of the same. By definition, absolutism is a violation of the self-understanding of the other. This violation regularly facilitates political unrest and bloody conflicts. In an attempt to transcend this hegemonic colonization, the relativist, on the other hand, simply surrenders the assessment of the other to subjective arbitrariness, being of the opinion that there are, and could never be, criteria in view of which the other might be judged non-arbitrarily (i.e. fairly or, if you like, “objectively”).<sup>7</sup> However, this attempt at the decolonisation of the other defeats itself, in so far as it deprives us of the right to criticise *any* other (including the colonising other), lest we be absolutists.

I would like to define Ubuntu as an African or African inspired version of an effective decolonising assessment of the other. That is, an assessment of the other which transcends absolutism without resorting to relativism. More specifically, I aim to show how Ubuntu both demonstrates and instructs us toward such an assessment.

Much can and has already been said about the presuppositions or requirements of assessments “beyond absolutism and relativism”. However, for present purposes, I shall concentrate on only three of these. The first involves a respect for the religiosity of the *religious* other - undoubtedly still a very significant other for many Africans and certainly for many South Africans. The second has to do with an agreement on criteria, i.e. with a common scale in view of which people from different cultures may jointly judge beliefs and practices. And the third pertains to the necessity of dialogue or the “mutual exposure” (cf. Taylor, 1985:125) of beliefs, which as such respects the particularity, individuality and historicity of these beliefs, and from which a common scale will emerge (if at all). I shall now briefly turn to each of these requirements and the way in which they are met by Ubuntu.

### **Ubuntu and religion**

The first important overlap between Ubuntu and a decolonising assessment of the other, has to do with a fundamental presupposition of such an assessment in cases where the other happens to be religious, viz. the fact that Ubuntu respects the religiosity or religiousness of the religious other. While many strands in Western Humanism tend to underestimate or even deny the importance of religious beliefs, Ubuntu or African Humanism is resiliently religious (Prinsloo, 1995:4; 1998:46). For the Westerner, the maxim "A person is a person through other persons" has no obvious religious connotations. S/he will probably interpret it as nothing but a general appeal to treat others with respect and decency. However, in African tradition this maxim has a deeply religious meaning. The person one is to become "through other persons" is, ultimately, an ancestor. And, by the same token, these "other persons" include ancestors. Ancestors are extended family.<sup>8</sup> Dying is an ultimate homecoming. Not only the living must therefore share with and care for each other, but the living and the dead depend on each other (Van Niekerk, 1994:2; Ndaba, 1994:13-14).

This accords with the daily experience of many (traditional) Africans. For example, at a *calabash*,<sup>9</sup> which is an African ritual that involves the drinking of beer (cf. Broodryk, 1997a:16), a little bit of beer is often poured on the ground for consumption by ancestors. And, as is probably well known (yet often misunderstood), many Africans also believe in God through the mediation of ancestors (Broodryk, 1997a:15). In African society there seems to be an inextricable bond between man, ancestors and whatever is regarded as the Supreme

Being. Ubuntu thus inevitably implies a deep respect and regard for religious beliefs and practices (Teffo, 1994a:9).<sup>10</sup>

In fact, even the faintest attempt at an “original”<sup>11</sup> or indigenous understanding of Ubuntu can hardly overlook the strong religious or quasi-religious connotations of this concept. According to traditional African thought, “becoming a person through other persons” involves going through various community prescribed stages and being involved in certain ceremonies and initiation rituals. Before being incorporated into the body of persons through this route, one is regarded merely as an “it”, i.e. not yet a person. Not all human beings are therefore persons. Personhood is acquired. Moreover, initiation does not only incorporate one into personhood within the community of the living, but also establishes a link between the initiated and the community of the living-dead or ancestors (Ramose, 1999:81, 88). Through circumcision and clitoridectomy blood is spilled onto the soil, a sacrifice is made which binds the initiated person

to the land and consequently to the departed members of his [or her – DJL] society. It says that the individual is alive and that he or she now wishes to be tied to the community and people, among whom he or she has been born as a child. This circumcision blood is like making a covenant, or a solemn agreement, between the individual and his [her] people. Until the individual has gone through the operation, he [she] is still an outsider. Once he [she] has shed his [her] blood, he [she] joins the stream of his [her] people, he [she] becomes truly one with them (Mbiti, 1975, in Ramose, 1999:88; cf. also Kimmerle, 1995:42).

Sceptic First World HR-specialists are therefore overlooking an important aspect of Ubuntu when they reduce it to nothing but “...the startling observation that if you treat people well they will perform better”, or merely to the need to “treat blacks less badly” (Author unspecified, 1995:72). If this is your understanding of Ubuntu, then you are bound to wonder, “So what’s new?”. On this score, Lovemore Mbigi’s recent appeal to African Spirit Religion to infuse the “African Business Renaissance” (2000) clearly represents a more serious and authentic application of Ubuntu in the business world.

I realize, of course, that none of my claims regarding African society and, especially, regarding the supposedly religiousness of this society (cf. Van Rinsum & Platvoet, 2001), is uncontroversial; even if only because of the fact that there is not just one African society, but there are many African societies. My claims regarding “African society” are admittedly generalizations, i.e. at most family resemblances between a plurality of (predominantly traditional sub-Saharan) African societies. Societies or cultures are in any event not monolithic, transparent

and neatly demarcated wholes. They overlap in a variety of ways. Important differences obtain inside and run across more or less discernable societies or cultures (cf. Van der Merwe, 1996:8; 1999:324).

### **Ubuntu and consensus**

A second important overlap between Ubuntu and a decolonising assessment of the other, pertains to the extremely important role which agreement or consensus plays within this assessment. Without a common scale, i.e. without an agreement or consensus on criteria, the beliefs and practices of the other simply cannot be judged without violating them. Ubuntu underscores the importance of agreement or consensus. African traditional culture, it seems, has an almost infinite capacity for the pursuit of consensus and reconciliation (Teffo, 1994a:4). Democracy the African way does not simply boil down to majority rule. Traditional African democracy operates in the form of a (sometimes extremely lengthy) discussion or *indaba* (Shutte, 1998a:17-18; Du Toit, 2000:25-26; Boele van Hensbroek, 1998:186f, 203f). Although there may be a hierarchy of importance among the speakers,<sup>12</sup> every person gets an equal chance to speak up until some kind of an agreement, consensus or group cohesion is reached. This important aim is expressed by words like *simunye* ("we are one", i.e. "unity is strength") and slogans like "an injury to one is an injury to all" (Broodryk, 1997a:5, 7, 9).

However, the desire to agree, which - within the context of Ubuntu - is supposed to safeguard the rights and opinions of individuals and minorities, is often exploited to enforce group solidarity. Because of its extreme emphasis on community, Ubuntu democracy might be abused to legitimize what Themba Sono calls the "constrictive nature" or "tyrannical custom" of a derailed African culture, especially its "totalitarian communalism" which "...frowns upon elevating one beyond the community" (1994:xiii, xv). The role of the group in African consciousness, says Sono, could be

...overwhelming, totalistic, even totalitarian. Group psychology, though parochially and narrowly based..., nonetheless pretends universality. This mentality, this psychology is stronger on belief than on reason; on sameness than on difference. Discursive rationality is overwhelmed by emotional identity, by the obsession to identify with and by the longing to conform to. To agree is more important than to disagree; conformity is cherished more than innovation. Tradition is venerated, continuity revered, change feared and difference shunned. Heresies [i.e. the innovative creations of intellectual

African individuals, or refusal to participate in communalism] are not tolerated in such communities (1994:7; cf. also Louw, 1995).

In short, although it articulates such important values as respect, human dignity and compassion, the Ubuntu desire for consensus also has a potential dark side in terms of which it demands an oppressive conformity and loyalty to the group. Failure to conform will be met by harsh punitive measures (cf. Mbigi & Maree, 1995:58; Sono, 1994:11, 17; Van Niekerk, 1994:4). Such a derailment of Ubuntu is, of course, quite unnecessary. The process of nation-building in post-apartheid South Africa does not, for example, require universal sameness or oppressive communalism. What it does require, is true Ubuntu. It requires an honest appreciation of differences and an authentic respect for human, individual and minority rights.<sup>13</sup> All of which is much easier said than done (or should I say applied?).<sup>14</sup>

This challenge, i.e. the challenge of affirming unity while valuing diversity, is at the centre of the still raging debate amongst African philosophers concerning the appropriateness of Western style multi-party democracy in African societies. Many people would, for example, be familiar with Kwasi Wiredu's plea for an African non-party polity. Wiredu argues for a consensual democracy which draws on the strengths of traditional indigenous political institutions and which, as such, does not "...place any one group of persons consistently in the position of a minority" (1998:375). Instead it aims to accommodate the preferences of all participating individual citizens (note: not parties). In the same vein, Mogobe Ramose blames the "adversarial multi-party systems of western democratic cultures" for undermining the principle of solidarity in traditional African political culture. Not that he undervalues the importance of opposition for a democratic dispensation. On the contrary, Ramose points out that "traditional African political culture embodied and invited opposition in the very principle of consensus. Surely, one cannot speak of consensus where there is no opposition at all" (1999:141). In fact, one gets the idea that Ramose is not as much *against* multi-party democracy, as he is *for* the maintenance of the African solidarity principle,<sup>15</sup> precisely because it safeguards the rights of individuals and minorities, better than any majoritarian democracy could.<sup>16</sup>

But how attainable and practicable is the solidarity or consensus at which Ubuntu democracy aims? In this regard, Wiredu's reference to the importance of a "willingness to compromise" and to the "voluntary acquiescence of the momentary minority" (1998:380) so as to allow the community to make a decision and follow a particular line of action, is significant. Ubuntu democracy allows for agreements

to disagree, Wiredu seems to claim. Note that the minority does not simply have to put up with or passively tolerate the overriding decisions of a majority. No, the minority *agrees* to disagree, which means that their constructive input is still acknowledged or recognised in communal decisions. No wonder then that Mfuniselwa Bhengu (1996) dares to call Ubuntu the “essence” of democracy, in spite of its strong emphasis on solidarity and community. Ubuntu as an effort to reach agreement or consensus should thus not be confused with outmoded and suspect cravings for (an oppressive) universal sameness, often associated with so-called teleological or “modernistic” attempts at the final resolution of differences (cf. Ramose, 1999:131, 132; Van der Merwe, 1996:12).<sup>17</sup> True Ubuntu takes plurality seriously. While it constitutes personhood *through other persons*, it appreciates the fact that “*other persons*” are so called, precisely because we can ultimately never quite “stand in their shoes” or completely “see through their eyes”.<sup>18</sup> When the Ubuntuist reads “solidarity” and “consensus”, s/he therefore also reads “alterity”, “autonomy”, and “co-operation” (note: not “co-optation”).

Its provision for agreements to disagree qualifies Ubuntu as an appropriate response to inter-cultural conflict specifically in so far as cultural differences might not be experienced as “of such a nature that people can be persuaded to leave them behind or exchange them” (Van der Merwe, 1996:12). That is, some people might conceive of or experience the beliefs in question not as beliefs that they are holding, but rather as beliefs that have them in their hold (so to speak). If so, then efforts to establish some inter-cultural agreement or consensus will inevitably stumble upon the “incommensurable”. Not in the sense in which this concept is usually used and which assumes the mutual exclusion of cultures or the impossibility of inter-cultural communication and understanding. “Incommensurability” here rather refers to the fact that the beliefs in question defy even the understanding, justification and explanation of those who hold them (cf. Van der Merwe, 1996:12). This is perhaps what Wittgenstein had in mind when he claimed that “you cannot lead people to what is good, you can only lead them to some place or other. The good is outside the space of facts” (repr. 1988:3e, in Van der Merwe, 1996:12). This is probably also what Kierkegaard had in mind when he referred to “the truth” as “a snare: you cannot have it without being caught. You cannot have the truth in such a way that you catch it, but only in such a way that it catches you” (1965:133, in LeFevre, 1968:33).

My explanation of the finitude of the Ubuntu effort to reach consensus or a “common scale” - given the fact that it might stumble upon the “incommensurable” in the sense just explained - assumes that this effort proceeds exclusively on a “discursive” level. That is, my explanation assumes that this effort involves the

deliberate critical discussion of suggested “scales” or criteria. However, it would be interesting to explore the sense in which the “mutual exposure” prescribed by Ubuntu also includes “non-discursive” (i.e. non-argumentative or non-rational or even subconscious) elements and concerns. That is, to explore the extent to which the consensus at which Ubuntu aims would constitute, for example, William James’ “immediate luminousness” (1978:37), or David Tracy’s “aesthetic” truth (1990:43). Bertrand Russell’s “knowledge by acquaintance” (versus “knowledge by description”), Cassirer’s “presentation” (versus “representation”), and Polanyi’s “tacit knowledge” (versus “explicit knowledge”), also spring to mind in this regard (cf. Handgraaf, 1983:66-67; Louw, 1994:61-62).<sup>19</sup> “Non-discursive” knowledge might also be what Shutte has in mind when he warns us not to take Ubuntu to mean

...merely that we recognise that every person is human and treat them with the same standards as we treat ourselves...it means something different from - and more than - that ... [C]ommunity is only created when I know and affirm... [the other - DJL] *as I know and affirm myself!* ...[Ubuntu - DJL] is not just the knowledge *that* we are both human and as such equally valuable and so to be equally affirmed. The knowledge I have of myself is not this sort of commonsense *or even theoretical knowledge* [italics mine]. It is a knowledge by contact or familiarity with the unique person that is me. This is the primary self-knowledge that I affirm when I affirm myself... And this is the knowledge and affirmation I extend to [the other - DJL]. (1998a:38-39; cf. also 1998a:78).

Perhaps “non-discursive” knowledge also coincides with Ramose’s “wholeness as experience” (Ubuntu), which he distinguishes from “wholeness as a concept” (1999:155). As experience, claims Ramose,

...wholeness cannot yield easily to absolutism and dogmatism in order to establish its authority. However, the same cannot be said about wholeness as a concept, that is, as the giving expression of the experience of wholeness through language (1999:155; cf. also 1999:57-58).

I might be overinterpreting both Shutte and Ramose here. Even so, the point is that to the extent to which the “mutual exposure” that is Ubuntu proceed on a “non-discursive” level, to this extent the Ubuntuist might justifiably still hope for and aim at consensus, in spite of the possibility that differences might not be experienced as of such a nature that people can be persuaded (i.e. discursively, argumentatively or rationally persuaded) to leave them behind or exchange them. But such a consensus would then not be the determinable result of critical deliberations. It would rather be a “truth as manifestation” (cf. Tracy, 1990:43), i.e.

the indeterminable or spontaneous result of an “uncritical” (i.e. non-argumentative, or non-rational, or even subconscious) process within which people “expose” themselves to each other (cf. Louw, 1994:63).

### **Ubuntu and dialogue: particularity, individuality and historicity**

This brings me to a third overlap between the Ubuntu way of life and a decolonising assessment of the other. As said, the common scale which will allow an effective decolonising evaluation of the other, will only emerge through dialogue or “mutual exposure”.<sup>20</sup> Such exposure epitomizes the conduct prescribed by Ubuntu. Ubuntu inspires us to expose ourselves to others, to encounter the difference of their humanness so as to inform and enrich our own (cf. Sidane, 1994:8-9). Thus understood, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* translates as: “To be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others in its infinite variety of content and form” (Van der Merwe, 1996:1; cf. also Ramose, 1999:193). This translation of Ubuntu attests to a respect for particularity, individuality and historicity, without which decolonisation cannot be.

The Ubuntu respect for the *particularities* of the beliefs and practices of others, is especially emphasised by a striking, yet (to my mind) lesser-known translation of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, viz.: “A human being is a human being through (*the otherness of*) other human beings” (Van der Merwe, 1996:1; italics mine). For post-apartheid South Africans of all colours, creeds and cultures, Ubuntu dictates that, if we were to be human, we need to recognise the genuine otherness of our fellow citizens. That is, we need to acknowledge the diversity of languages, histories, values and customs, all of which constitute South African society. For example: white South Africans tend to call all traditional African healing practices “witchcraft”, and to label all such practitioners as “witchdoctors”. However, close attention to the particularities of these practices would have revealed that there are at least five types of doctors in traditional African societies.<sup>21</sup> And of these five, witchdoctors are being singled out as possible causes of evil by Africans themselves (cf. Brand, 2001). By contrast, the co-operation of the other traditional healers is vital in primary health care initiatives, such as Aids education, family planning and immunisation programmes (Broodryk, 1997a:15; 1997b:74-75). In this sense, but also in a more political sense, the Ubuntu emphasis on respect for particularity is vital for the survival of post-apartheid South Africa. In spite of our newly found democracy, civil or ethnic conflict cannot be ruled out. In fact, our multi-cultural democracy intensifies the various ethnic and socio-cultural differences. While democracy allows for legitimate claims to the institu-



tionalisation of these differences, these claims are easily exploited for selfish political gain (Van der Merwe, 1996:1).

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 (cf. Macquarrie, 1972:104). 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.

By contrast, Ubuntu *defines* the individual in terms of his/her relationship with others (Shutte, 1993:46f). 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.<sup>22</sup> Being an individual by definition means "being-with-others". "With-others", as Macquarrie<sup>23</sup> rightly observes, "...is not added on to a pre-existent and self-sufficient being; rather, both this being (the self) and the others<sup>24</sup> find themselves in a whole wherein they are already related" (1972:104).<sup>25</sup> Ubuntu unites the self and the world in a peculiar web of reciprocal relations in which subject and object become indistinguishable, and in which "I think, therefore I am", is substituted for "I participate, therefore I am" (Shutte, 1993:47). 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.

In the West, individualism often translates into an impetuous competitiveness. Individual interest rules supreme and society or others are regarded as nothing but a means to individual ends (cf. Khoza, 1994:4, 5, 7; Prinsloo, 1996:2). This is in stark contrast to the African preference for co-operation, group work or *shosholoz*a ("work as one", i.e. team work). There are approximately 800 000 so-called "stokvels" in South Africa. Stokvels are joint undertakings or collective enterprises, such as savings clubs, burial societies and other (often formally registered)

cooperatives. The term refers to a wide range of community-based financial arrangements according to which resources are pooled and then again disbursed to members as either (interest-free) loans or payouts (Du Toit, 2000:32-33). The *stokvel* economy might be described as capitalism with *siza* (humanness), or, if you like, a socialist form of capitalism.<sup>26</sup> Profits are shared on an equal basis. Making a profit is important, but never if it involves the exploitation of others. Or, as a Sepedi (Northern Sotho) saying dictates: *Feta kgomo o tshware motho*, i.e. "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 life" (Ramose, 1999:194). As such, *stokvels* are based on the Ubuntu "extended family system", i.e. all involved should be considered as brothers and sisters, members of the same family (Broodryk, 1997a:4, 11, 13-14; 1997b:38f, 70f; Lukhele, 1990; Kimmerle, 1995:88; Prinsloo, 1998:44-45).<sup>27</sup>

To be sure, the Ubuntu conception of individuality does seem contradictory. Ubuntu claims that the self or individual is constituted by its relations with others. But if this is so, what are the relations between? Can persons and personal relations really be equally primordial? (cf. Shutte, 1993:56). African thought<sup>28</sup> addresses this (apparent) contradiction in the (somewhat controversial)<sup>29</sup> idea of *seriti*,<sup>30</sup> i.e. an energy,<sup>31</sup> power or force which is claimed to both make us ourselves and unite us in personal interaction with others (Shutte, 1993:55; 1998a:13-15). This idea allows us to see the self and others as equiprimordial or as aspects of the same universal field of force. However, as Shutte observes, this "solution" of the contradiction posed by the Ubuntu conception of individuality, comes at a price:

...in the perspective opened up by the African idea of the universe as a field of forces, it is difficult to see how the existing individual can have any enduring reality at all, much less how he [or she - DJL] can be possessed of the freedom and responsibility that is usually reckoned the most valuable mark of personhood (1993:56).

Furthermore, like the Ubuntu desire for consensus, this inclusivist, collectivist or communalist conception of individuality can easily derail into an oppressive collectivism or communalism. This fact has evoked various responses from African authors. For example, while he lauds the "distinctive African" inclination towards collectivism and a collective sense of responsibility, Teffo (1994a:7, 12) is quick to add that the African conception of man does not negate individuality. It merely discourages the view that the individual should take precedence over the community. In the same vein, Khoza (1994:9; cf. also Prinsloo, 1995:4) challenges Ubuntu to create a balance between complete individual autonomy and homonymy,

i.e. to broaden respect for the individual and purge collectivism of its negative elements. And Ndaba points out that

the collective consciousness evident in the African culture does not mean that the African subject wallows in a formless, shapeless or rudimentary collectivity...[It] simply means that the African subjectivity develops and thrives in a relational setting provided by ongoing contact and interaction with others (1994:14).

I concur. An oppressive communalism constitutes a derailment, an abuse of Ubuntu. By contrast, true Ubuntu incorporates dialogue, i.e. it incorporates both relation and distance. It preserves the other in her otherness, in her uniqueness, without letting her slip into the distance (cf. Macquarrie, 1972:110; Shutte, 1993:49, 51; Kimmerle, 1995:90-93).

Ndaba's emphasis on the "ongoing-ness" of the contact and interaction with others on which the African subjectivity feeds, points to a final important ingredient of the "mutual exposure" prescribed by Ubuntu, viz. respecting the *historicity* of the other. Respecting the historicity of the other means respecting his/her dynamic nature or process nature. The flexibility of the other is well noted by Ubuntu. Or, as is sometimes claimed: "For the [African] humanist, life is without absolutes" (Teffo, 1994a:11). An Ubuntu perception of the other is never fixed or rigidly closed, but adjustable or open-ended. It allows the other to be, to become. It acknowledges the irreducibility of the other, i.e. it never reduces the other to any specific characteristic, conduct or function. This accords with the grammar of the concept "Ubuntu" which denotes both a state of being and one of becoming. As a process of self-realization *through* others, it enhances the self-realization *of* others (cf. also Broodryk, 1997a:5-7).<sup>32</sup>

And again, to return briefly to the agreement or consensus that Ubuntu both describes and prescribes, this consensus is not conceived of in fixed, ahistorical or foundationalist terms. It is not expected to apply or remain the same always and everywhere. On the contrary, such an expectation fundamentally contradicts the African's pantareic conception of the universe, i.e. his/her conception of being "...as a perpetual and universal movement of sharing and exchange of the forces of life" (Ramose, 1999:57-58). When the Ubuntuist thus reads "consensus", s/he also reads "open-endedness", "contingency", and "flux" (cf. Louw, 1999b:401).

## **Concluding remarks**

By highlighting the overlap between Ubuntu and a decolonising assessment of the other, I meant to show exactly why Ubuntu might be used to explain, motivate or underscore this decolonisation, or why Ubuntu could add a distinctly African flavour and momentum to it. However, my argument will only hold water if what has been described here as a distinctly African philosophy and way of life, does in fact exist as such. Do Africans in fact adhere to Ubuntu or, at least, aspire to do so? And if so, is Ubuntu uniquely or exclusively African?

These are controversial issues. For example, until recently, in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal (where Ubuntu is claimed to be part of every day life), violent ethnic and political clashes occurred frequently - and this is surely not the only example of such clashes on the continent of Africa! How can this be reconciled with Ubuntu?<sup>33</sup>

The apparent anomaly posed by the occurrence of such violent conflicts significantly fades once one concentrates on the many counter examples. African examples of caring and sharing, and of forgiving and reconciliation abound (though you will probably not read about them in the papers or see them on cable news). The relatively non-violent transition of the South African society from a totalitarian state to a multi-party democracy, is not merely the result of the compromising negotiations of politicians. It is also - perhaps primarily - the result of the emergence of an ethos of solidarity, a commitment to peaceful co-existence amongst ordinary South Africans in spite of their differences (Van der Merwe, 1996:1). Ubuntu, argues Teffo (1994a) rightly, pervasively serves as a cohesive moral value in the face of adversity. Although the policy of apartheid greatly damaged the overwhelming majority of black South Africans,

...there is no lust for vengeance, no apocalyptic retribution...A yearning for justice, yes, and for release from poverty and oppression, but no dream of themselves becoming the persecutors, of turning the tables of apartheid on white South Africans...The ethos of ubuntu...is one single gift that African philosophy can bequeath on other philosophies of the world...(Teffo, 1994a:5).<sup>34</sup>

Maphisa agrees:

South Africans are slowly re-discovering their common humanity. Gone are the days when people were stripped of their dignity (*ubuntu*) through harsh

laws. Gone are the days when people had to use *ubulwane* [i.e. animal like behaviour - DJL] to uphold or reinforce those laws...the transformation of an apartheid South Africa into a democracy is a re-discovery of *ubuntu* (1994:8; cf. also Shutte, 1998a:2).

These observations would probably not make much sense to the bereaved families of murdered white farmers, or to the parents of the black youth killed by members of an all-white rugby football team in the Northern Province of South Africa recently. I do not mean to insult those who suffer the growing pains of a new South African society - victims of "zinloos geweld" (pointless violence). I respect their pain and share their anger and frustration. Ubuntu is a given, but clearly also *a task*. Ubuntu is part and parcel of Africa's cultural heritage. But it obviously needs to be revitalised in our hearts and minds (cf. Teffo, 1995:2; Koka, 1997:15). In fact, I have been speaking of Ubuntu primarily as an ethical ideal, i.e. something that still needs to be realized, although encouraging examples thereof already exist (cf. Shutte, 1998a:20).

In what sense, if any, is Ubuntu then uniquely African? Is Ubuntu only part of the *African* cultural heritage? Just how distinctly African is the flavour and momentum that Ubuntu could add to the decolonisation of the other? Is the ethos of Ubuntu in fact the "one single gift that African philosophy can bequeath on other philosophies of the world" (Teffo)?

It would be ethnocentric and, indeed, silly to suggest that the Ubuntu ethic of caring and sharing is uniquely African. After all, the values which Ubuntu seeks to promote, can also be traced in various Eurasian philosophies.<sup>35</sup> This is not to deny the intensity with which these values are given expression by Africans. But, the mere fact that they are intensely expressed by Africans, do not in itself make these values exclusively African.<sup>36</sup>

However, although compassion, warmth, understanding, caring, sharing, humanness, etc. are underscored by all the major world views, ideologies and religions of the world, I would nevertheless like to suggest that Ubuntu serves as a *distinctly African rationale* for these ways of relating to others. The concept of Ubuntu gives a distinctly African meaning to, and a reason or motivation for,<sup>37</sup> a decolonising attitude towards the other. As such, it adds a crucial *African appeal* to the call for the decolonisation of the other - an appeal without which this call might well go unheeded by many Africans (cf. Mphahlele, 1974:36; Ndaba, 1994:18-19; Prinsloo, 1998:48-49).<sup>38</sup> In this, and only in this peculiar sense, Ubuntu is of Africans, by Africans and for Africans.

The conception of Ubuntu that I have been developing is admittedly a re-evaluation or reinterpretation of an inherited traditional notion.<sup>39</sup> Some may even want to claim that I have been enslaving the African Other through Eurocentric, neo-colonialist (re)definition.<sup>40</sup> If so, then it should be viewed as the, perhaps inevitable, off-spin of an honest effort to understand and effectively apply a pre-modern<sup>41</sup> inheritance in a post-modern world with its very different notions of consensus, solidarity and tradition. This is proving to be a difficult endeavour. In fact, one may justifiably wonder whether Ubuntu *can* survive the transition from a pre-modern to a post-modern society (cf. Bouckaert, 2001:2; Sampson, 2000). Much more can and needs to be said in response to this interesting and important question, especially, one fancies, with regard to its underlying hermeneutical assumptions.

Amid calls for an African Renaissance,<sup>42</sup> Ubuntu calls on Africans to be true to themselves. It calls for a liberation of Africans - not so much from the colonising gaze *of others*, but from colonization *per se*, i.e. from the practice of colonization, whether of Africans or by Africans. May we heed its call.

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#### Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> This paper was published by the Unitwin Student Network at <<http://www.phys.uu.nl/~unitwin/>>, and may also be published by the Centre for Southern Africa (EZA) (<<http://www.let.uu.nl/EZA/>>). Parts of this paper overlap with Louw (1999a).
- <sup>2</sup> Alternatively: *Umuntu ungumuntu ngabanye abantu*.
- <sup>3</sup> Which is also the Xhosa version, though Xhosa equivalents usually exclude the “u” after the “m” to make: *Umntu ngumntu ngabantu* (cf. for example Goduka & Swadener, 1999:38) or *Umntu ungumntu ngabanye abantu*. Thanks to Thobeka Daki for pointing this out.
- <sup>4</sup> The word “ubuntu” is also used in other Bantu languages, for example Xhosa and Ndebele. Some Southern African equivalents include: “botho” (in Sotho or Tswana), “(h)unhu” (Shona), “bunhu” (Tsonga), and “vhutu” (Venda).
- <sup>5</sup> Many definitions of Ubuntu have already been given, all of which relate closely to the one given here (cf. for example Broodryk, 1995:5f; 1997a:1-2; 1997b:27f; Bhengu, 1996:1-12; Prinsloo, 1994; 1995:2; 1998:41-43; Sindane, 1994:1-2; 1995:8-9; Teffo, 1995:1-2; Pityana, 1999:144-145).
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. also the Government Gazette, 02/02/1996, No.16943, p.18, paragraph 18, as cited by Broodryk (1997a:1).
- <sup>7</sup> I deliberately use the term “non-arbitrarily” in order to avoid the positivistic and foundationalist overtones of the term “objectively”. The use of the term “objectively” is often accompanied by the presuppositions that phenomena may be judged *completely* unbiased and in view of criteria which are irrevocably valid (i.e. ahistorically valid criteria or “foundations”).

- <sup>8</sup> For an explanation of the Ubuntu conception of "extended family", cf. Broodryk (1997a:14; 1997b:70f; Shutte, 1998a:18).
- <sup>9</sup> The word "calabash" is also used to refer to the beer container.
- <sup>10</sup> Ubuntu is often defined in religious terms. Cf. for example Koka (1996:2-3).
- <sup>11</sup> As Ramose (1999:133-134) rightly points out, it is impossible to restore the so-called "original" version of Ubuntu. Our understanding of Ubuntu can at best be an innovative reconstruction of traditional conceptions. But, whatever traditional understandings and applications of Ubuntu might have been (or still are), surely the more important question has to be: Given the current call and need for an African Renaissance, how *should* Ubuntu be understood and utilized for the common good of *all* Africans, and of the world at large? (cf. Ramose, 1999:163-164; Shutte, 1998a:20).
- <sup>12</sup> According to some authors no such hierarchy is assumed (cf. Kimmerle, 1995:110).
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. Sindane (1994:7), Degenaar (1994; 1996:23), Kimmerle (1995:101-103), Prinsloo (1998:49), and Shutte (1998a:108-109).
- <sup>14</sup> It is fair to say that a respect for multiculturalism, including and specifically multilingualism, is at the heart of the intention of the South African Constitution (cf. Article 6). However, applying what the Constitution dictates in this regard, is proving to be an extremely difficult challenge.
- <sup>15</sup> I.e. the traditional principle of "oneness", which, together with the traditional principles of "consensus", "openness", and "humility", will facilitate the "true liberation of Africa" (Ramose, 1999:145).
- <sup>16</sup> Cf. in this regard also Ramose's strong emphasis on the Sepedi (Northern Sotho) saying: *Kgosi ke kgosi ka batho*, i.e. "the King owes his status, including all the powers associated with it, to the will of the people under him [in traditional African societies – DJL]" (1999:151; also cf. 1999:144).
- <sup>17</sup> To put it in a different way: The Ubuntuist is not aiming at consensus because of some or other unwillingness or inability to handle otherness or appreciate variety, or, worse, because of a sinister wish to suppress otherness through hegemonic sameness (cf. Shutte, 1998a:9, 19; Van Tongeren, 1998:147). Far from it! The ultimate aim of the common scale for which the Ubuntuist aims and which s/he hopes would result from "being exposed" to the other, is to allow them to *jointly* assess their beliefs and practices. More specifically, this common scale would assist them in *avoiding* an absolutist assessment (i.e. understanding and evaluation) of the other. Thus, the Ubuntuist aims at consensus *precisely because* s/he respects otherness and values variety or plurality!
- <sup>18</sup> Cf. also Sevenhuijsen (2000:6). Thanks to Selma Sevenhuijsen for assisting me in identifying the exciting overlaps (or apparent overlaps) between the ethic of care and the Ubuntu ethic, also and specifically with regard to Ubuntu's respect for otherness and individual personhood. "Care ethics," says Sevenhuijsen, "is based on notions of relationality and interdependence. Thinking in terms of binary oppositions between autonomy and dependence, individual and community, and independent citizens and those dependent on care is exposed. The guiding principle of the ethic of care is that people need each other in order to lead good lives, and that they can only exist as individuals through and via caring relationships with others" (2000:4). Cf. also Sevenhuijsen (1996), especially chapters 1 and 2.
- <sup>19</sup> Not to mention the rich variety of contributions to what seems to be a resurgent re-appreciation of spirituality, transcendence, mystery, intuition, myth, ritual, the non-verbal, the emotional or experiential, etc. in some "Western" philosophical circles (cf. Solomon &

- Higgins, 1995:xxxi-xxxviii). Here is scope for more of prof. Heinz Kimmerle's exciting "mazungumzo"! Cf. Kimmerle (1995).
- <sup>20</sup> Cf. "...if [a common - DJL] scale, or decolonized assessment, of the...other is to occur, it must occur as it emerges out of the dialogue process of encounter itself. This accords with the pluralist stance - where else can it emerge but in the particularities intercausally arising?" (Wells, 1997:5).
- <sup>21</sup> Viz.: (i) a *ngaka ya ditaola* (who uses "divine bones" to diagnose ailments and to assist him in deciding which herbs to prescribe); (ii) a *ngakatjhitja* (who also treats ailments through prescribing herbs, but without the assistance of "divine bones"); (iii) a *senohe/isangoma* (who treats mentally disturbed patients, a "psychiatrist"); (iv) a *monesapula* (a "rainmaker"); and (v) the "witch-doctor" (who uses body parts for "medicine" and kills through poisoning, lightning or by sending a *thokolosi* to do so on his/her behalf). Cf. Lenaka (1995:6).
- <sup>22</sup> Cf. also Sevenhuijsen with regard to the meaning of trust in an ethic of care: "Trust is aided by the willingness to be open for, not only 'others' and 'the world', *but also for 'the other in oneself'*. This is often more successful if people live in diverse contexts, if people are confronted with differences, and if possibilities exist for evaluating the practices in question" (2000:5-6; italics mine).
- <sup>23</sup> Macquarrie is not specifically describing the Ubuntu conception of individuality, but the existentialist conception thereof. However, in this and in other respects, Ubuntu philosophy overlaps with or complements Existentialism (cf. Shutte, 1998a:29-30, 31f).
- <sup>24</sup> Who, for the traditional African, include both ancestors and descendants (cf. Teffo, 1994a:8).
- <sup>25</sup> Cf. on this point the feminist critique of an ethics of rights specifically in so far as it presupposes an atomistic conception of human nature (Sevenhuijsen, 1996:24f). Thanks also to Grietje Dresen for raising concerns with regard to Ubuntu and gender.
- <sup>26</sup> Or what Du Toit refers to as "...an harmonious integration between pre-colonialist African values and the values of the capitalist world, uniting individual and communal gain" (2000:33). Du Toit's discussion of the *stokvel* practice draws on a fascinating report by Oosthuizen (1997), who also refers to *imiholiswano* – a financial arrangement with a *stokvel* structure, but less widespread and on a smaller scale (involving between four and ten people).
- <sup>27</sup> Cf. also in this regard a practise called *Ledima*, where neighbour farmers assist a particular farmer with collecting the harvest, after which the host treats them to slaughtered cows and beer (cf. Broodryk, 1997a:14; Bhengu, 1996:7).
- <sup>28</sup> Again, this is admittedly a generalization. I would not like to claim that each and every "African" is holding these beliefs or would accept these views (cf. Teffo & Roux, 1998:137; More, 1996:153).
- <sup>29</sup> Cf. Kaphagawani (1998:170-172).
- <sup>30</sup> If this is indeed the appropriate word (cf. More, 1996:153-154; Ramose, 1999:194).
- <sup>31</sup> Also cf. Shutte (1998b:434-435).
- <sup>32</sup> Cf. on this point also Shutte's "subsidiarity principle" which signifies "self-determination-through-other-dependence" or "autonomy-through-interdependence" (cf. 1998a:63, 87, 100, 107). This also appears to be a guiding principle of the ethic of care, specifically with reference to the idea of "relational autonomy" (Sevenhuijsen, 2000:4). Says Sevenhuijsen: "People develop a sense of 'self' because there are others who recognise and confirm their sense of individuality, who value their presence in the world and who make concrete efforts to enable them to develop their capabilities" (2000:4; cf. also 2000:8).
- <sup>33</sup> Cf. also Broodryk (1997a:10).



- <sup>34</sup> Cf. also Shutte (1998a:112), and Van Binsbergen (1999) on the “African technology of reconciliation”.
- <sup>35</sup> However, some African authors suggest that African articulations of these values are far older than Western articulations thereof - even that the latter have their roots in the former (cf. for example Ndaba, 1994:12; Koka, 1997:16).
- <sup>36</sup> Cf. in this regard Prinsloo (1995:2), Ndaba (1994:10, 11), Mbigi (1995:6), Teffo (1994b:4; 1995:2), Koka (1996:2-4, 8; 1997:14), Maphisa (1994:1), Broodryk (1995:31-37) and Sindane (1994:4).
- <sup>37</sup> Says Ali Mazrui: “Africa can never go back completely to its pre-colonial starting point but there may be a case for at least a partial retreat, a case for re-establishing contacts with familiar landmarks of yesteryear and restarting the journey of modernisation *under indigenous impetus*” (in Mbigi & Maree, 1995:5; italics mine). In the same vein Vilakazi urges indigenous scholars to “become anthropologists doing field work on their own people and on themselves, as part of a great cultural revolution aimed at reconstructing Africa and preparing all of humanity for conquering the world with humanism” (in Goduka & Swadener, 1999:40).
- <sup>38</sup> Cf. also Teffo: “The Africanness of Ubuntu is how we localize or express it...Ubuntu will assist us in developing a social approach that suits our situation in relation to our varied cultures and values” (1995:1).
- <sup>39</sup> One sometimes wonders whether the Ubuntu of traditional African societies really coincides with the “universal law of love” it is made out to be by many authors (including, to some extent, the present one). Sometimes - especially if one concentrates on the deeply religious significance of Ubuntu (including the importance of initiation rites, etc.) - one gets the impression that, in traditional societies, Ubuntu functioned (and still functions) as a binding ethic *exclusively* within the boundaries of a specific tribe or clan. This negative impression is strengthened by Ubuntu’s apparent potential to motivate ethnic clashes (cf. Du Toit, 2000:30), and by the way in which some black South Africans sometimes refer to Ubuntu as *the* definitive difference between themselves as Africans and non-Africans (including so-called “coloureds”, Asians and whites). This is in stark contrast to the emphasis many authors (including black African authors) put on the inclusiveness of Ubuntu and to, for instance, one of Steve Biko’s (somewhat puzzling) remarks about traditional African society. Biko claims: “In almost all instances there was help between individuals, tribe and tribe, chief and chief, etc., even in spite of war” (1998:28; cf. also Ramose, 1999:149-153).
- <sup>40</sup> Cf. the title of Van Rinsum’s (2001) dissertation. Much appreciated concerns in this regard have also been raised by *inter alia* Bocken (2001), Bouckaert (2001), and, in conversation, by Koen Boey, Paul van Tongeren, Selma Sevenhuijsen, Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, Wim van Binsbergen, and Heinz Kimmerle.
- <sup>41</sup> I am not using the term “pre-modern” in any pejorative sense here. Moreover, not all traditional African societies neatly fit into the category “pre-modern”. For example, in a pre-modern sense, “solidarity” often means “being inextricably and exclusively imbedded in or committed to one specific group”. However, the anthropologist and philosopher, Wim van Binsbergen, points out that “in Central African villages even the following situation obtains: any individual has a considerable number of possible group memberships at the same time (of a number of villages, a number of clans), and it is only in concrete situations of conflict and reconciliation, when the social process intensifies, that one commits oneself, temporarily, to one specific group membership, allowing this to define who one is, which side one is on, and what one hopes to get out of the conflict” (1999:3). If anything, this manifestation of “group

membership” is reminiscent of a post-modern, not pre-modern, understanding of “solidarity”. In a post-modern sense, “solidarity” often signifies, not permanent and exclusive membership of any particular group, but rather a complex and ever-changing multiplicity of partly overlapping, partly conflicting group memberships (cf. Bouckaert, 2001:2).

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Pityana (1999:144f), Teffo (1997:19-21; 1999:149f), and Ntuli (1999:193f).

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## **AFRICAN RENAISSANCE AND THE MILLENNIUM ACTION PLAN**

**Priscilla Jana**

More than 350 years ago, Dutch sailing ships set off to find new markets in the East to create a new era of international trade. It was to be a great era during which the bounties of trade with far-off lands were brought back to Europe to enrich the lives of the many peoples of Europe.

The Dutch ships of the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (V.O.C.) and those of the other great European trading nations of the time, Spain, Portugal, France and Britain docked at numerous ports along the vast African coast. The sailors came across rich cultures of people, of which many were themselves, great trading nations.

The Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese met up with a continent which held cultures that had developed great sophistication in Art, Mathematics and especially in the medical sciences. Some of the greatest and oldest Universities of the world were on the African continent at that time. Unfortunately things then started to go very wrong.

Hundreds of years of the systematic exploitation of Africa's most precious resource of that time, its PEOPLE, followed. This dark era saw the great scholars and physicians of Africa exported like its other products, timber, ivory and gold to Europe and the Americas to become the physicians and scholars in the courts of European and American noblemen. Like Europe before it, Africa was plunged into a Dark Age from which it still has to recover.

Today, almost 350 years after that first contact between our two nations, I stand here before you to tell you of the dawning of a NEW era, a NEW Renaissance: THE AFRICAN RENAISSANCE.

The then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, after the formation of the Organisation of Africa Unity (OAU) in 1963, said: "Perhaps the most exciting thing happening in the 20th Century is the awakening of Africa". The rebirth, revival and renewal of Africa are encapsulated in the vision of an African Renaissance and in the belief that this will truly be the African Century.

The African Renaissance vision is an all-embracing concept that draws its inspiration from the rich and diverse history and cultures of Africa. It acknowledges Africa as the cradle of humanity, whilst providing a framework for the modern Africa to re-emerge as a significant partner in the New World order. This framework touches on all areas of human endeavour; political, economic, social, technological, environmental and cultural.

We in Africa are currently in a critical phase of the development of our Continent. It is a very exciting period as, for the first time, Africa is taking the lead in determining the agenda and the direction for the advancement of Africa's needs and interests. As a Continent, we are endeavouring to work out solutions to the challenges facing Africa. Our efforts are aimed at ensuring that the African Renaissance becomes a reality and that this indeed is the African Century. To realise this vision, we are confronted by various challenges. Essentially these challenges arise from three paradigms. Firstly, the North-South divide, which is a result of the historical legacy of the colonial and cold war eras. Secondly, the New World order, characterised by globalisation and the knowledge economy, underpinned by rapid advancements in information technology. Lastly, the repositioning of Africa into the global mainstream, which entails a comprehensive and honest appraisal of the weaknesses inherent on the continent.

In order to achieve the social and economic regeneration of the Continent, the pre-eminent issue of poverty alleviation, through sustained people-centred development, must be vigorously pursued. The engine for poverty alleviation and people-centred development is the economy. However, there are a number of priorities that serve to support the social and economic regeneration agenda, as well as the further two pre-conditions for an African Renaissance, i.e. stability and security. These are the co-operation priorities.

It is important that Africa and the South develop a common agenda and then, in a co-ordinated fashion, present this agenda to the wider international community and the developed world, in order to secure support for the achievement of the goals of the agenda. This agenda and programme of action is encapsulated in the Millennium Africa Recovery Programme (MAP), which represents the leading edge of our continental interaction with particularly the developed countries and organisations of the North.

This Compact for African Renewal arises from the mandate given to Presidents Obasanjo, Bouteflika and Mbeki at the Extraordinary Summit in Sirte in 1999 and at the South Summit in April 2000. The mandate was extended at the OAU Summit

held in Togo in July 2000, where the Presidents were charged with engaging the developed North with a view to developing a constructive partnership for the regeneration of the continent.

Much work has since taken place, both in developing the Programme and in discussing the Programme with our partners in the North. The three Presidents attended the G8 meeting in Okinawa during 2000 and the framework for the Programme was presented at the World Economic Forum in Davos. The MAP framework was again discussed at the Extraordinary OAU Summit held in Libya at the beginning of March 2001. The Summit endorsed the Programme and mandated the Presidents to continue with the development of the detailed Programme of Action.

The MAP is a pledge by African leaders based on a firm and shared conviction that they have a pressing duty to eradicate poverty and to place their countries, both individually and collectively, on a path of sustainable growth and development. It is anchored on the determination of Africans to extricate themselves and the continent from the malaise of underdevelopment and exclusion in a rapidly globalising world. The MAP seeks to build on and celebrate the achievements of the past, it also reflects the lessons learned through painful experience, in order to establish a partnership that is both credible and capable of implementation. Africa's place in the global community is defined, in addition to its growing market and potential size, by the fact that the continent is an indispensable resource base that serves all humanity, as it has done for many centuries.

Africa's strategic resource base can be broken down into the following components:

- Africa's rich complex of mineral and material resources, which are critical to global production processes.
- Africa's bio-diversity, crucial to combating environmental degradation, as well as contributing to world science and technology.
- Africa is the cradle of humanity, as affirmed by the paleontological and archaeological sites containing evidence of the evolution of the earth, life and the human species.
- Africa's rich cultural legacy, its philosophies, art and music, all of which continue to impact increasingly on world culture.

In the new globalising era, it is critical that we bring to bear the combination of the above attributes, on a platform of equal partnership with the developed North for the advancement of humanity as a whole.



The MAP recognises that there have been attempts in the past to set out continent-wide development programmes. For a variety of reasons, these have not been very successful. However, today there are new sets of circumstances that lend themselves to integrated practical implementation. These include the new resolve to deal with conflicts and bring about peace on the continent; accountable government; a growing culture of human rights; a new core of African Leadership committed to good governance and democracy; and progressive economic co-operation and integration (both regional and continental).

The key priorities, which the MAP seeks to implement simultaneously and in interaction with one another, are:

- Peace, security and governance
- Investing in Africa's people
- Harnessing Africa's strategic advantages
- Investing in ICT and other basic infrastructure
- Developing financing mechanisms.

The Programme of Action that derives from these priorities entails:

- Creating peace, security and stability, and democratic governance without which it would be impossible to engage in meaningful economic activity;
- Investing in Africa's people through a comprehensive human resource strategy;
- Harnessing and developing Africa's strategic and comparative advantages in the resource based sectors to lead the development of an industrial strategy;
- Increasing investments in the Information and Communication Technology sector without which we would not be able to bridge the digital divide;
- Development of infrastructure including transport and energy;
- Developing financing mechanism.

The African leaders participating in the MAP realise the keen interest of both industrialised countries and the multilateral institutions to participate in the renewal of Africa's development. They also equally recognise the advantages for themselves of such participation. The leaders of industrialised countries and the multilateral institutions are therefore invited to join this initiative as partners, under African Leadership.

I am sure you are all asking yourselves by now how this ambitious programme will be managed. Well, it is envisaged that a Forum of African Leaders participating in the process will direct the MAP. The functions of the Forum will be to:

- Make decisions about sub-programmes and initiatives within the framework of the programme of action, including sequencing of initiatives and identification of implementing agencies. These decisions will be binding on participating countries;
- Review progress on implementation of past decisions and take steps to address problems and delays;
- Make decisions about additional participants in the Forum.

The MAP offers a historical opportunity for the advanced countries of the world, such as The Netherlands, to enter into a genuine partnership with Africa, based on mutual interest, shared commitment and binding agreement. In proposing the partnership, Africa recognises that it holds the key to its own development. The adoption of a development strategy, as set out in the broad approach which I shortly outlined for you today, together with a detailed programme of action, will mark the beginning of a new phase in the partnership and co-operation relationship between Africa and the developed world. As you are aware, the process is still evolving and once finalised, will need to be taken back to the OAU for adoption before being made public. This process is expected to be finalised shortly.

I thank you for this opportunity to share with you the vision we Africans have of the new African era, THE AFRICAN CENTURY. I challenge you all, as young and energetic scholars to again look towards Africa as your forefathers did, and join us in partnership in making the African Renaissance a reality.



## **IN SEARCH OF AN AFRICAN RENAISSANCE**

### **An agenda for modernisation, neo-traditionalism or Africanisation?**

**Ineke van Kessel**

A search for the African Renaissance, the present buzzword in South Africa, produces a wide variety of meanings. Searching the web results in several hits under Renaissance Incorporated: the African Renaissance as marketing device. Searching South African bookshops leads predictably to the section 'Politics' or 'Current Affairs', again to 'Business', but also to 'Religion': the African Renaissance as ideological and spiritual beacon, as a political programme for Thabo Mbeki's government, an instrument of foreign policy, Africa's response to globalisation, a marketing strategy and a 'back to roots' recipe for moral regeneration. African Renaissance conferences resonate with pan-African nostalgia and romanticised visions of Africa's heritage and lost empires. Traditional chiefs evoke the African Renaissance to safeguard their power and privilege: the African Renaissance as an instrument of neo-traditionalism.

So what's new? The African Renaissance has been proclaimed for more than a century. The most widespread wave of Renaissance announcements coincided with the decade of African independence in the 1960s. The latest Renaissance revival emerged when Nelson Mandela, newly elected as President of South Africa, addressed the Organisation of African Unity in 1994. Applauded by the gathered dignitaries in Tunis, he announced the advent of the African Renaissance. Subsequently, the African Renaissance has become the trademark of Thabo Mbeki's government. Many South African adepts of the Renaissance seem remarkably unaware of the long pedigree of the African Renaissance and previous debates among African intellectuals, demonstrating the continuing intellectual isolation of South Africa on the African continent.

What is the meaning and significance of the South African version of the African Renaissance? What is on the Renaissance agenda? And who is included or excluded in the notion 'African'? This chapter explores three interpretations of the African Renaissance: as an agenda for modernisation, an agenda for neo-traditionalism, and an agenda for Africanisation.

In all three cases, the African Renaissance is used to fill an ideological vacuum in the post-Cold War world. The African National Congress, as the ruling party in South Africa, is in need of a new legitimising ideology. As a liberation movement, the ANC-in-exile adopted a rather orthodox brand of Marxism, although it was officially never a socialist movement. Once in government, the

ANC elite underwent a rapid conversion to market economics. Thabo Mbeki allowed his membership of the South African Communist Party –formerly the hallmark of the chosen few in ANC ranks- to lapse quietly. The Reconstruction and Development Programme (a social-democratic type of government program focusing on basic needs) was quietly shelved after only two years in power. Under the presidency of Nelson Mandela, the proclaimed ideal for South Africa was the ‘rainbow nation’, a poetic image of unity in diversity, inspired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The New South Africa would be a model of racial harmony, culturally diverse yet jointly engaged in the great task of nation-building. Mandela’s profile was that of the Great Conciliator. Particularly in the first half of his presidency, Mandela invested much time and energy in assuaging white fears. Among his more controversial gestures were the tea visits with Betsy Verwoerd, the widow of the architect of apartheid, and with the public prosecutor who had sought to have the death penalty imposed on him and his fellow activists in the 1960s. The West applauded in adoration but among black South Africans, grumbles of discontent gathered volume. After all, the liberation struggle was not fought to protect white privilege but to obtain a fair share for blacks. The time had come to shift priorities from white to black. Moreover, most whites showed little inclination to engage in the challenges of building a new society. Everybody was only too eager to be photographed with Mandela, as long as life could go on as before. The ideal of a rainbow nation stranded on a barrier of white egoism and black nationalism.

Addressing parliament in 1988, the then Deputy President Mbeki proclaimed that the project of reconciliation and nation-building had failed. South Africa, he stated, had not made the requisite progress towards nation-building and the construction of a non-racial society with a sense of common destiny. South Africa remained deeply divided, a country of two nations. According to Mbeki, one nation is white and prosperous, with ready access to a developed economic, physical, educational and communications infrastructure. The second and larger nation is black and poor, the worst affected being women in the rural areas, the black rural population in general and the disabled. For this nation it is virtually impossible to exercise what in reality amounts to a theoretical right to equal opportunity, enshrined in the 1993 constitution. “And neither are we becoming one nation. Consequently, also, the objective of national reconciliation is not being realized.”<sup>1</sup>

According to Mbeki, white and rich South Africans are obviously not prepared to help underwrite the upliftment of black and poor South Africans. The call for the transformation of both public and private sector institutions and organisations, in particular to address the issue of racial representativity, has in many cases been resisted with determination. Whites doggedly oppose affirmative

action and proclaim that “black management in the public service equals inefficiency, corruption and a lowering of standards”.<sup>2</sup>

The Mbeki government subsequently introduced equity legislation to promote affirmative actions policies in order to make both the public and the private sector representative of the South African population at large, in terms of race and gender. With hindsight, Mbeki’s ‘two nations’ speech can be seen as landmark. It sealed the eclipse of the vision of a rainbow nation and announced a new, assertive black nationalism. Priorities have shifted from assuaging white fears to a forceful promotion of black advancement. The African Renaissance, adopted in 1997 as one of the fundamental pillars of the ANC’s programme, resonates with an assertive black nationalism that was previously largely associated with the ideology of the rival Pan Africanist Congress (PAC).

### **Mbeki’s Renaissance: A modernising mission**

Mbeki’s vision of Africa’s rebirth was initially launched as a pan-African vision. In a speech to American businessmen in 1997, he stated that the continent was at last rising from depths of war, genocide, famine and bad government. “We see a new Zaire, perhaps with a new name, a new Zaire which shall be peaceful, democratic, prosperous, a defender of human rights, an exemplar of what the new Africa should be (...). But still, outside our continent, the perception persists that Africa remains as of old, torn by interminable conflict, unable to solve its problems, condemned to the netherworld.”<sup>3</sup> But when war flared up again in the Great Lakes region and Angola, Mbeki concentrated his efforts on his Renaissance mission within South Africa itself. He did not, however, loose his pan-African ambitions, as is evident from his Millennium Africa Renaissance Programme, which he presented to the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2001. This programme, having won the support of the leaders of Nigeria and Algeria and having merged to some extent with a rival initiative from President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal, was adopted by the newly launched African Union at its inaugural summit in Lusaka in July 2001.

Mbeki’s Renaissance is a secular modernising programme that is political and economic in focus and that pays comparatively little attention to cultural dimensions. Among the priorities are democratisation, good governance, anti-corruption campaigns, economic growth, poverty reduction and foreign investment. Mbeki’s vision of the African Renaissance includes joining the information superhighway, the emancipation of women, debt cancellation, improved access to international market for African products and sustainable development.

Mbeki’s vision is inspired by a largely mythological interpretation of African history, by “the rediscovery of our soul, captured and made permanently available

in the great works of creativity represented by the pyramids and sphinxes of Egypt, the stone buildings of Axum and ruins of Carthage and Zimbabwe, the rock paintings of the San, the Benin bronzes and the African masks, the carvings of the Makonde and the stone sculptures of the Shona.”<sup>4</sup>

That is a truly pan-African vision. But what is the message conveyed by this mixed bag of monuments and art works, spanning the whole continent and several millennia? Which elements of Africa’s past can be used as building blocks for the future?

Africa’s common experience in effect began in the era of European colonisation. The history of precolonial Africa tells of civilisations and empires (such as Ashanti, the Zulu empire or the merchant cities along the trans-Sahara route), but there is no notion of a common African civilisation with a sense of common destiny. Here Africa’s history differs substantially from Europe’s, where the Renaissance borrowed its inspiration from Greco-Roman civilisation, that had laid the infrastructure for the spread of Christianity. Europe’s Renaissance could draw on a common heritage. In the history of the African continent, the notion of ‘Africa’ and of Africans sharing a common destiny originates in the African diaspora.

Where can inspiration be found in Africa’s past for a programme focusing on democratisation, gender equality and accelerated economic development? Mbeki proclaims that “the way forward must be informed by what is, after all, common to all African traditions: that the people must govern”.<sup>5</sup>

This claim is hard to swallow. After all, the pyramids of Egypt were not built by workers with trade union rights; most African states practised slavery, just like pre-modern societies elsewhere; Shaka Zulu was a military genius but definitely not a democrat even though Mbeki praises his courage, vision and fearlessness.

Is it perhaps unfair to analyse Mbeki’s programme from a Eurocentric vantage point? Is his vision inspired by a unique African genius? However, Mbeki explicitly rejects “the long-held dogma of African exceptionalism”, the notion of Africa as a curiosity, an exotic theme park on the margins of world history. “My people are not a peculiar species of humanity!”<sup>6</sup> Mbeki called on fellow Africans to discard the notion that democracy and human rights are uniquely western concepts. Speaking at an African Renaissance conference in 1998, he blasted African despots and selfish elites.<sup>7</sup> And in another speech in the same year he said: “The call for Africa’s renewal, for an African Renaissance is a call to rebellion. We must rebel against the tyrants and the dictators, those who seek to corrupt our societies and steal the wealth that belongs to the people. To be a true African is to be a rebel in the cause of the African Renaissance, whose success in the new century and millennium is one of the great history challenges of our time.”<sup>8</sup>

Small wonder that many African rulers maintain a safe distance from Mbeki's Renaissance. In 1998, a number of African ambassadors declined invitations to attend the first high-profile African Renaissance conference in South Africa. "They ask 'what's this African renaissance nonsense'?" complained leading organiser Thami Mazwai.<sup>9</sup> Mbeki's vision differs in at least two important aspects from previous Renaissance philosophies, developed by previous generations of African intellectuals over the past century. His focus is on accelerated economic development, on joining the global economy, not on culture or the spirituality of the African soul as was common in previous Renaissance waves. Secondly, unlike his predecessors, Mbeki does not invoke a unique African genius.

In a previous generation, Nkrumah, Senghor, Nyerere and Kaunda based their visions of an African personality, *Négritude*, *Ujamaa* or African humanism on a supposedly unique African soul. Mbeki is not interested in notions of African uniqueness but in obtaining Africa's full share of universal progress. Addressing the African-European summit in 2000 in Cairo, the South African president stated that a strategic partnership between Europe and Africa ought to be built on a system of common values.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Mbeki is not a blind believer in the promised land of globalisation. He criticises the belief in "the market as a modern god, a supernatural phenomenon to whose dictates everything human must bow in a spirit of powerlessness."<sup>11</sup>

The African Renaissance has become a crucial concept of South Africa's foreign policy. While Mbeki's speeches are not antagonistic to globalisation, provided that Africa can join in on equal terms, an ANC discussion document on foreign policy projects the African Renaissance as an antidote to globalisation. The document entitled "Developing a Strategic Perspective on South African Foreign Policy" states unambiguously that "the concept of an African Renaissance provides a powerful vision not only for the African continent but for the development of a just and equitable world order. It is for this very reason that an African Renaissance poses a threat to the strategy of globalising capitalism. In fact, globalisation contradicts the very agenda of the Renaissance. Therefore, the success of the Renaissance depends on the depths of and extent to which it challenges globalisation."<sup>12</sup>

Mbeki's views of the African Renaissance, as explained to numerous audiences from New York to Tokyo and Davos, are neither anti-capitalist nor anti-globalisation *per se*. However, his universalist views are not universally shared in South Africa, neither within his own ANC nor in black intellectual circles, where most of the African Renaissance debates are taking place. Many African intellectuals do indeed invoke a specifically African soul, a mind set inscrutable for outsiders. This culturalist interpretation fits the agenda of traditionalists and neo-traditionalists as well as Africanists.



### **African Renaissance as a legitimization for neo-traditionalism**

A widespread popular understanding of the African Renaissance is of a movement calling for a return to one's 'roots'. As Eddy Maloka notes, "there is more and more interest in the public sphere in what are believed to be traditional African practices and beliefs. One element of this perspective is the notion of *ubuntu*, a concept that has been around for some years but has recently resumed more popularity."<sup>13</sup> In this traditionalist understanding -or as Maloka labels it, a culturalist perspective- the African Renaissance becomes an exclusivist notion. "At the heart of the African Renaissance beats the pulse of *ubuntu*", stated Professor Pitika Ntuli, Director of the African Renaissance Institute of the University of Durban-Westville.<sup>14</sup>

*Ubuntu* refers to traditional African values such as a sense of community, hospitality, sharing and consensus seeking. It is widely advocated that these values ought to be preserved in the process of Africa's rebirth. But these values are common to the romantic self-image which is fostered by rural communities all over the world, as Willem van Vuuren notes in his critical assessment.<sup>15</sup> There is in fact, very little that is uniquely African in the notion of *ubuntu*. Yet *ubuntu* in its current usage – a traditional sense of community among Africans- serves as a mechanism of exclusion. It is something that Africans have, and that whites do not. It underpins a more exclusivist understanding of the African Renaissance, based on values shared by black South Africans only. The traditionalist or culturalist perspective is also popular among black religious leaders, looking to Africa's heritage to found spiritual sustenance for their campaigns for moral renewal.<sup>16</sup>

While Mbeki's renaissance is an agenda for modernisation, such a renaissance is also popular with traditionalists who invoke Africa's heritage to entrench vested interests or to regain power and privileges. Chiefs, posing as standard bearers of African heritage, have made particularly adroit use of the African Renaissance discourse. At the outset of the 1990s, chiefs were widely perceived in ANC circles as feudal relics of a past age. If they were to be retained in the New South Africa, it would be in a marginal, largely ceremonial role. However, since 1994 the chiefs have made a remarkable comeback, demanding and obtaining a restoration of privileges and vastly improving their own financial remuneration in the name of African tradition and dignity. African tradition can and has been used by hereditary chiefs in their resistance against elected local government, which was denounced as something 'un-African'.

Invoking African tradition rarely spells good news for gender equality. But the quest for gender equality is an explicit theme in Mbeki's renaissance.

## **African Renaissance as an agenda for Africanisation**

Is an African Renaissance for Africans only? “Simple logic dictates that only Africans can understand, declare, initiate, implement, commit themselves and lead and African Renaissance”, claimed Professor William Makgoba, a leading Renaissance pundit, at a high-profile Renaissance conference in 1998. He voiced his concern about the scepticism raised in the media, the business sector and universities, all unwilling “to rally behind these calls of being African”.<sup>17</sup>

Who is an African? For Mbeki, ‘African’ is not a racial category. In a landmark speech marking the passing of the new constitution by parliament, Mbeki emphasised the constitutional principle that Africans are not defined by race, colour, gender or historical roots. In this speech, Mbeki’s definition of an African is emphatically inclusive. ‘Africans’ are the descendants of the Khoi and the San, the Malay slaves, the European migrants, the African warriors, the victims of the concentration camps of the Boer War and the contract labourers recruited in India.<sup>18</sup> But Mbeki’s speech did not calm minorities who fear being excluded from the benefits of an African Renaissance. Prominent Afrikaners, including Frederik van Zyl Slabbert and Breyten Breytenbach, stated their concern that an African Renaissance promises a future for black South Africans only. They advocate a more inclusive ideology, in which Afrikaners can be defined as Africans as well. Mbeki’s statement obviously cannot be taken as the final word on ‘African-ness’.

That is not surprising. In popular discourse, the African Renaissance is often understood as a ‘blacks only’ thing. Moreover, current discourse has narrowed the meaning of ‘blacks’ to black Africans only, thus reverting a decades-old move towards a more inclusive notion of blacks. From the days of Steve Biko’s Black Consciousness Movement, African South Africans have largely accepted ‘oppressed minorities’, meaning Coloureds and Indians, as fellow blacks. Although current affirmative action policies recognise Coloureds and Indians as ‘previously disadvantaged’, many Africans no longer consider these minorities - who suffered disadvantage under apartheid, but to a lesser extent than Africans- as fellow blacks.

With the non-racial, colour-blind tradition of socialism on the decline and an assertive black nationalism on the rise, the African Renaissance can easily be harnessed as a vehicle for a thorough process of Africanisation and African advancement. The flagbearers of an outspoken black nationalism, inside and outside the ANC, see a future for whites, coloureds and Indians only if and when these minorities are prepared to accept a subordinate position under African leadership. An ANC discussion document entitled “Theses on the National Question” (1997) proclaimed the need for a “permanent struggle to ensure African hegemony, al be it in the context of a multicultural and non-racial society”. This

document expresses doubts as to the usefulness of the image of a 'rainbow nation' in the struggle to ensure African hegemony.<sup>19</sup>

Prominent black intellectuals perceive national reconciliation and transformation no longer as supplementary but as contradictory notions: "reconciliation versus transformation".<sup>20</sup> Transformation no longer refers to a broad process of democratisation of state and society –including racial representativity- as it did at the beginning of the 1990s. Its current meaning is all too often narrowed down to a process of Africanisation. For leading Renaissance advocates such as Makgoba and Mazwai, 'African' means black, or at the very least, a total identification with 'blacks'. The African Renaissance can be filled with virtually any content and is therefore readily adaptable to suit the cause of black advancement and black empowerment. In itself, these are laudable and necessary causes after centuries of white advancement and white economic empowerment. But being black is insufficient merit when it comes to building a more just society. In spite of the eloquent rhetoric about development and nation-building, a substantial part of the new black elite has quickly forgotten previous ideals of equitable development, honest government and upliftment of the poor. Collective ideals of democracy, participatory government and poverty reduction have been overtaken by individual aspirations. Presently, members of the new elite and those desiring to join the club, have set their hearts on having a BMW, five credit cards and a white secretary. Invoking the African Renaissance, they lay claim to the same privileges previously the monopoly of the white elite. But this type of African Renaissance would be void of any meaningful content.

Post-Apartheid South Africa shows little evidence of developing a distinct cultural identity. African heritage is readily invoked to justify certain policies and practices but successful blacks tend to emulate American or Afro-American lifestyles. Black and white spend their leisure time and their money in the ever-increasing number of megalomaniac shopping malls, a secluded world of shops, restaurants, cinemas, discos and casinos, guarded by armies of private security guards. Privatisation of public space seems an unstoppable process. Conspicuous consumption has become the hallmark of much of the new black elite, most of whom express precious little interest in either the past or the present of the African continent. The new elite draws its inspiration not from the Benin bronzes, the learned tradition of Ethiopia or the political institutions of pre-colonial Africa, but from American-style consumerism.

However, criticism of the African Renaissance is not limited to non-blacks who worry whether South Africa holds a future for them. Leftwing black intellectuals denounce Mbeki's African Renaissance as a cover for a neo-liberal agenda, a Trojan horse for the Washington Consensus. Africans outside South Africa fear the implications of a Pax Pretoriana, if Africa's economic powerhouse

is serious about its vocation in Africa. References to an African Renaissance are conspicuously absent from the New Africa Initiative adopted by the newly established African Union, although the document abounds with calls for 'renewal'.<sup>21</sup>

Purists reproach Mbeki for turning to Europe's heritage to dig up the concept of a Renaissance, instead of exploring Africa's own rich heritage. Professor M.B. Ramose advocates the symbolism of *mokoko* (cock, in Sotho) and *hungwe* (the mythological Zimbabwe bird). He announces the "time of the birds", a time when the ancestral gods of Africa remind Africans that a remedy of historical injustice by historical justice is long overdue. This is the "season of the return of the land to its original rightful owners, the period of reversion to unmodified and unencumbered sovereignty. It is the age of restitution and reparation to Africa."<sup>22</sup>

And from all sides came of course claims that the notion of an African Renaissance is hopelessly romantic, considering that the African continent seems to have been virtually written off by the rest of the world.<sup>23</sup> However, as Africa veteran Colin Legum argues, there is nothing wrong with romantic realism. Quoting the poet Shelley ("Without dreams there is no glimpse of the future"), he reminds us that the ideals of equality and liberty that inspired great revolutions in Europe were just as hopelessly romantic.<sup>24</sup>

The problem is not that Mbeki's Renaissance lacks historical accuracy and a clear political programme. His vision of Africa's rebirth can play a constructive role as an antidote to widespread Afro-pessimism. The flipside is that the African Renaissance can mean all things to all people. Void of content, it can easily be filled by those in search of an ideology to justify their own selfish pursuit of power and privilege. The African Renaissance could easily be hijacked by that segment of the black intelligentsia, business and political class that seeks to impose its own version of renewal: a narrow, exclusivist black African nationalism. Examples of withdrawal into a bastion of Africanist chauvinism include black academics who argue that African mathematics or science need not be tested with the criteria of 'western' science; politicians who accuse the media of unpatriotic behaviour when they criticise the government; journalists who believe that the ideals of the African Renaissance require that the media consult black experts only; and state officials and entrepreneurs who amass fabulous wealth within years or even months, believing themselves invulnerable behind the shield of Black Empowerment.

Critics can easily be silenced. Those who voice criticism or scepticism must be Afro-pessimists beyond hope, opponents of the national interest, enemies of Africa. If that scenario unfolds, the African Renaissance will be nothing but the facile justification of the careerism of a new black elite, demonstrating the same selfish greed and absence of social responsibility as their white predecessors.

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**Notes:**

- <sup>1</sup> “South Africa: Two Nations”, in: Thabo Mbeki, *Africa: The Time Has Come. Selected Speeches*. Cape Town/Johannesburg: Tafelberg/Mafube, 1998, p. 72
- <sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 75
- <sup>3</sup> “Africa’s Time Has Come”, in: Mbeki, *Africa*. p. 201
- <sup>4</sup> “The African Renaissance” in: Mbeki, *Africa*, p. 299
- <sup>5</sup> “Africa’s Time Has Come”, in: Mbeki, *Africa*, p. 201
- <sup>6</sup> “The African Renaissance, South Africa and the World”, in Mbeki, *Africa*, p. 241
- <sup>7</sup> “Prologue” in M.W. Makgoba, ed., *African Renaissance*. Cape Town/Sandton: Tafelberg/Mafube, 1999, pp. xiii-xxi
- <sup>8</sup> “The African Renaissance” in: Mbeki, *Africa*, , p. 300
- <sup>9</sup> F. Haffajee, “Midwives behind African Renaissance Incorporated”, *Mail and Guardian*, 2-8 October 1998.)
- <sup>10</sup> Statement of the President of the Republic of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, at the Africa-EU semmint, Cairo 3-4 April 2000.
- <sup>11</sup> “Prologue”, in Makgoba, *African Renaissance*, p. xviii
- <sup>12</sup> ANC, Developing a Strategic Perspective on South African Foreign Policy, 1997
- <sup>13</sup> Eddy Maloka, “The South African ‘African Renaissance’ Debate: A Critique”, in: Eddy Maloka and Elizabeth le Roux, eds., *Problematising the African Renaissance*. Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2000, p. 5
- <sup>14</sup> Pitika Ntuli, “Who’s Afraid of the African Renaissance?”, in: *Indicator South Africa*, vol. 15, no. 2, p. 16
- <sup>15</sup> Willem van Vuuren, “African Renaissance: A Monochrome or Rainbow Vision?” in: *Politeia*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2000), pp. 62-80
- <sup>16</sup> See for example: Mukanda Mulemfo, *Thabo Mbeki and the African Renaissance*. Pretoria: Actua Press, 2000.
- <sup>17</sup> Inter Press Service, 28 September 1998
- <sup>18</sup> “I am an African”, in Mbeki, *Africa*, pp. 31-36
- <sup>19</sup> ANC, Theses on the National Question, ANC discussion document
- <sup>20</sup> “Introduction” in: M.W. Makgoba, ed., *African Renaissance*. Cape Town/Sandton: Tafelberg/Mafube, 1999, p. vii
- <sup>21</sup> A New African Initiative, merger of the millennium partnership for the African Recovery Programme (MAP) and Omega Plan, July 2001. This document was adopted by the African Union, the successor organisation to the Organisation of African Unity, at the summit in July 2001 in Lusaka. Largely based on South Africa’s MAP initiative, it also incorporates elements from Senegal’s Omega Plan.
- <sup>22</sup> M.B. Ramose, “African Renaissance”-A Northbound Gaze”, in: *Politeia*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2000), pp. 47-61
- <sup>23</sup> See for example the cover story of the *Economist* on 13-19 May 2000: “Africa –The Lost Continent”.
- <sup>24</sup> Colin Legum, “Renaissance – Romantic Realism”, *Politeia*, vol. 19, no 1 (2000), pp. 67-77.

## **UBUNTU AND THE GLOBALISATION OF SOUTHERN AFRICAN THOUGHT AND SOCIETY**

**Wim van Binsbergen<sup>1</sup>**

*Ubuntu in various Southern African contexts and in a researcher's personal itinerary*

Over the past twenty years,<sup>2</sup> *ubuntu* (a word from the Nguni language family, which comprises Zulu, Xhosa, Swati, and Ndebele) and the equivalent Shona word *hunhu* have been explored as viable philosophical concepts in the context of majority rule in South Africa and Zimbabwe. In the hands of academic philosophers, *ubuntu/hunhu* has become a key concept to evoke the unadulterated forms of African social life before the European conquest. The world-view (in other words the values, beliefs, and images) of precolonial Southern Africa is claimed to survive today, more or less, in remote villages and intimate kin relationships, and to constitute an inspiring blue-print for the present and future of social, economic and political life in urban and modern environments, at the very centres of the economy and the political system. It is thus that *ubuntu/hunhu* also serves as a concept in management ideologies in the transitional stages of post-apartheid. How does one manage the contradictions of the post-apartheid situation? That situation comprises: Africa's most viable economy; a highly complex, largely urban and industrial society; an overdeveloped state apparatus originally geared to oppression of the majority of its population; caste-like intra-societal divisions in terms of wealth, education, information, and concrete social power; the newly-gained constitutional equality of all South African citizens; the rising expectations among Black people who have historically been denied the White minority's privileges of class and colour; the majority's simmering resentment, both about past wrongs and about the slowness of present compensations and rewards; a drive among individual Blacks to gain financial and occupational security as quickly as possible; the highest rates of violent crime in the world today; and above all the general traumatising that comes with having lived under, and having survived, the apartheid state: being forced to realise that no amount of economic gain and political power can erase the permanent damage to the personality through earlier humiliation, oppression, exclusion, and loss – and the desperate question as to what source of wisdom, identity, meaning, salvation could heal such trauma. The contradictions which this combination of traits presents, have been manifest in myriad forms over the past decade. To confront these contradictions by an

effective, factual renewal of social, economic, judicial and political life is a formidable task, that needs new and historically unsuspect concepts, new sources of meaning and transformation, among which that of *ubuntu* has been proposed prominently.

The form of the word *ubuntu* (and all equivalent forms in neighbouring languages) is purely productive in the morphological linguistic sense. It is the result of coupling the prefix generating abstract words and concepts (i.e. *ubu-*, in the Nguni languages) to the general root *-ntu* which one and a half centuries ago persuaded the pioneering German linguist Bleek<sup>3</sup> to recognise a large Bantu-speaking family: the entire group of languages, spoken from the Cape to the Sudanic belt, where the root *-ntu* stands for 'human'.<sup>4</sup> Several morphological combinations involving the root *-ntu* are possible in any Bantu language; e.g. in the Nkoya language of western central Zambia, the following forms appear: *shintu* 'human', *muntu* 'a human', *bantu* 'humans, people', *wuntu* 'human-ness, the quality of being human, humanity (as a quality, not as a collective noun denoting all humans)', *kantu* 'Mr Human', *Buntu* 'the country of humankind', etc.

Now, it is only human for such a basic word to have a very wide and internally richly textured semantic field, a vast area of possibilities and implications, out of which in concrete contexts a specific selection is being made, triggered by the juxtapositions which accompany the root *-ntu* (in its specific morphological elaborations) in that context.

Such a semantic field may be mapped out by born speakers of Bantu languages on the basis of their introspection, but it is also open to empirical study by anyone who assesses the characteristics of the various situations in which expressions featuring the root *-ntu* can be overheard.

Thus in the context of ritual in a Southern African village setting without strangers present, *-ntu* will primarily be used in opposition to the non-human visible world of the animal, vegetal and mineral kingdom, and to the invisible world of the supernatural, spirits, ancestors, gods, God. In this cosmological domain, not too much emphasis would be placed (as would be the case in Islam and Christianity) on the differences between *-ntu* and other ontological categories, but instead the essential continuity between these categories would be acknowledged. When a hunter after killing a large animal (lion, elephant) cannot simply return to the village but has to be cleansed first at the village boundary as if he were a murderer, this rule defines both the village as the purified, domesticated domain of the human by contrast to uncontrolled nature, and also the anthropomorphic qualities attributed to the animal in the sense of being capable of taking revenge and requiring propitiation.<sup>5</sup> The notion of supernatural transcendence is only weakly articulated in this Southern African world-view. Hence the difficulty of attributing the inevitable element of decay, death and destruction in human life to a

transcendent divine agency; instead, in a sorcery-based conception of evil, humans tend to be blamed for the negative side of life.

Somewhat contrasting with the cosmological application of *-ntu*, in a socio-legal context, when articulating the nature and degree of a person's transgression of social and religious norms, *-ntu* is likely to be used in order to juxtapose the inhuman, not in the sense of 'being bestial or divine', but in the sense of being 'of humans, but transgressing the scope of humanity'. The latter applies to sorcery; to extreme and uncalled-for violence especially between kinsmen; and to the extreme transgression of codes of conduct which regulate the behaviour between genders and between age groups (blatant disrespect vis-à-vis elders, overburdening under-age children, committing incest and murder etc.). There is a clear link here with the world-view discussed in the preceding paragraph: under such human transgressions, nature is supposed to grind to a halt, life force reduced to a minimum, and as a result crops fail, births stagnate, and death prevails, until the cosmological order is restored by socio-legal-ritual means, by a king if the society as a whole is affected, by a lesser chief or a diviner-priest in cases of more restricted scope. Two ways are open to handle the contradiction between 'human' and 'no-longer-human' under this aspect of *-ntu*: the transgressing person may be coaxed back into the folds of humanity (by means of collective reconciliation, prayers at the ancestral shrine, elaborate admonitions, ritual cleansing, judicial action, payment of a fine), or declared to be hopeless and treated accordingly. In the latter case the return to humanity is ruled out by killing the perpetrator — either by administering the poison ordeal under supervision of a king, chief or diviner-priest, or in the absence or behind the back of these authorities, by lynching. This shows that *-ntu* as a legal category is not infinitely accommodating, not without boundaries: extreme anti-social behaviour is its boundary condition.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, when strangers are part of the social situation in which the concept of *-ntu* is being used, especially in the colonial and postcolonial situation in Africa, *-ntu* invokes *local, autochthonous* humanity, by contrast to beings who somatically and historically clearly stand out as *not* autochthonous, and whose very humanity therefore may be called in question, or even denied. The colonial officer, the missionary, the anthropologist, the capitalist farmer, the industrial manager and entrepreneur, for a century or more right up to the to the establishment of Black majority rule in Southern Africa, could never (and would never) aspire to the status of *muntu* in the eyes of the African majority population. In the colonial situation therefore the word *muntu*, or in its plural form *bantu*, emerged, in English and Afrikaans as spoken by the White dominant group, to contemptuously denote African colonial subjects — by opposition to their political, industrial and spiritual, self-styled 'masters', the Whites.<sup>7</sup> 'White *muntu*', '*muntu*-lover' etc. was a common insult used by Whites against those who, despite European somatic features and



origin, yet transgressed the boundaries of colonial society and identified with Blacks against the perceived, short-term interest of the White colonial presence. For a White person entertaining such *Wahlverwandschaften*<sup>8</sup> with Blacks in the colonial and post-colonial situation, part of her or his struggle for an Africa-oriented self-definition was to be accepted, by African friends, as *muntu*.

Indeed, I shall never forget how deeply moved I was when, after more than ten *years* of intensive contact with the Nkoya people in the context of anthropological and historical fieldwork in Zambia, one of my close Nkoya friends explained my position to another Nkoya man who, not knowing me personally, was uneasy about my presence in an otherwise fully Nkoya environment. My friend said:

*Byo, baji muntu, baji kankoya* — ‘no, can’t you see, he is a [Black] person, he is a Nkoya’

Against this background it was a shock for me to be denied *muntu*-status in the urban, capitalist environment of Francistown, Botswana, and the surrounding Northeast district, a part of Botswana that ever since the late 19th century had been thoroughly exposed to the devastating effects of White monopoly capitalism. There any person having (like me) Dutch as his ethnic identity and mother tongue, was irrevocably<sup>9</sup> a hereditary enemy, a *liburu* (‘Boer-thing’, *li-* being the prefix reserved for inanimate objects), and could never become a *motho* (‘person-human’, in the Tswana variant of the *-ntu* root). Being denied personhood landed me in a depression from which after a few years, thanks to the local treatment that was extended to me, I emerged as a *sangoma*:<sup>10</sup> a local, i.e. African, diviner-spriest, specialist in divination and healing, by public rituals and initiations confirmed in the status of *autochthonous human person*, and moreover, like all traditional religious and therapeutic specialists in Southern Africa, a recognised guardian of the spiritual principles that underlie local society. It is then also that I could realise how much my earlier identity as an investigating, empirical anthropological field-worker, professionally insisting on the otherness of my African research subjects and on my own strangerhood, constituted an ideology of absolute otherness embarrassingly similar to the restricted concept of *muntu / bantu* in the apartheid sense of African colonial subject. It is this insight that made me leave cultural anthropology behind and instead pursue a form of intercultural philosophy where dialogical intersubjectivity is taking the place of scientific objectivation.

This stance informs the peculiar methodology of the present argument. While I do make use of social science insights into the nature of contemporary Southern African societies (including those based on my own research), I will

attempt not to objectify from a scholarly distance; neither to fall in the trap of accepting the codifiers' reifications of *ubuntu* as standard philosophical texts, merely offering philosophical criticism but ignoring the specific sociology of knowledge to which this reification owes its existence and appeal. Instead I shall make a personal participant's contribution to the continuing dialogue on issues of identity, values, and conflict. Recognising the utopian and prophetic nature of the concept of *ubuntu* will allow me to see a vast field of positive application for this concept at the centre of the globalised, urban societies of Southern Africa today. *Ubuntu* philosophy, I will argue, constitutes not a straight-forward *emic* rendering of a pre-existing African philosophy available since times immemorial in the various languages belonging to the Bantu language family. Instead, *ubuntu* philosophy will be argued to amount to a remote *etic* reconstruction, in an alien globalised format, of a set of implied ideas that do inform aspects of village and kin relations in at least many contexts in contemporary Southern Africa; the historical depth of these ideas is difficult to gauge, and their format differs greatly from the academic codifications of *ubuntu*. After highlighting the anatomy of reconciliation, the role of intellectuals, and the globalisation of Southern African society, my argument concludes with an examination of the potential dangers of *ubuntu* as mystifying real conflict, perpetuating resentment (as in the case of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission), and obscuring the excessive pursuit of individual gain. Finally the potential released by *ubuntu* will be brought to bear on this argument itself, in a bid to overcome what otherwise might appear to be merely a stalemate between South and North intellectual production.

### *Ramose on ubuntu and globalisation*

The book *African philosophy through ubuntu* which my friend and former colleague Mogobe Ramose published in Zimbabwe in 1999,<sup>11</sup> is in several respects a remarkable and refreshing contribution to African philosophy. Its background is not (as in most other African philosophy) the societies of West or East Africa but those of Southern Africa; current philosophical work from Africa, Belgium and The Netherlands features among the book's references while the French influence is limited; and the author's specialisation in the field of the philosophy of international relations (instead of metaphysics, classics, or African Studies) is reflected in the book's emphases. The book's final chapter deals with globalisation and *ubuntu*, and here the argument may be summarised as follows. The globalisation process in which the modern world is increasingly drawn, amounts to the ascendance of a market-orientated economic logic of maximalisation, in which the value, dignity, personal safety, even survival of the human person no longer

constitute central concerns. This process is reinforced by the North Atlantic's region's drive for political and cultural hegemony. African societies have suffered greatly in the process, but their lasting value orientation in terms of *ubuntu* holds up an alternative in the sense that it advocates a renewed concern for the human person. This alternative, Ramose argues, is already applied in the peripheral contexts of villages and kin groups in Southern Africa today but is also capable of inspiring the wider world, where it may give a new and profound meaning to the global debate on human rights.

According a declared and recognised Afrocentrist,<sup>12</sup> such a line of argument should be music to my ears. The argument is in line with the recent exhortations toward an African renaissance.<sup>13</sup> The general attitude implied in this position may be summed up as follows:

‘Africa, which the force of North Atlantic hegemony has for centuries relegated to the periphery of global social, economic, and cultural life, proudly and defiantly declares that it possesses the spiritual resources needed to solve its own problems even though the latter were caused by outside influences — and recommends the same spiritual resources as remedy for the ills of the wider world beyond Africa’.<sup>14</sup>

*Ubuntu* as a form of African philosophy thus blends in with other potential, imagined or actual gifts of Africa to the wider world: African music and dance, orality and orature, kingship, healing rituals in which trance and divination play major roles, a specific appreciation of time, being and personhood — all of them cultural achievements from which especially the North Atlantic could learn a lot and (to judge by the latter's dominant forms of popular music and dance throughout the twentieth century) is increasingly prepared to learn, in a bid to compensate such spiritual and corporeal limitations and frustrations as may be suspected to hide underneath the North Atlantic's economic, technological, political and military complacency.

*Recognising the utopian and prophetic nature of ideology;  
the dilemmas of deconstruction*

We should appreciate such a line of argument as utopian and prophetic.

The word ‘utopian’ comes from the ancient Greek *ou-*, ‘no-’, and *topos*, ‘place’; it designates the act of evoking an ideal society which is — as yet — nowhere to be found except in the philosopher's blue-print. The production of utopias constitutes a most respectable philosophical tradition: starting with Plato

(whose work described *utopias* in *Timaeus* and *Republic* without using the technical term; and whose treatment of Egypt<sup>15</sup> is often utopian); then Plutarch (whose idealised description of Sparta is decidedly utopian); then via Thomas More's *Utopia*, and via Swift's and Montesquieu's caricatural utopias of the early Enlightenment which were only thinly disguised descriptions of their own times and age, to Engels, Mannheim, Bloch, Buber, Dahrendorf — after which the concept ended up as a cornerstone of intercultural philosophy in the work of Mall.<sup>16</sup>

Less of a recognised philosophical concept is the term 'prophetic', associated as this term is with philosophy's pious twin-sister theology, with the epistemological pitfall of foreknowledge, and with the mystical distancing from rationality.<sup>17</sup> I use 'prophetic' here not in the sense of speaking in the name of<sup>18</sup> God, but as addressing the ills, contradictions and aporias of one's time and age: conditions which one shares with many other members of one's society, which one therefore has felt and grappled with in one's personal life, and which, once articulated in more general terms on that personal basis, are recognised by one's fellow-humans as illuminating, encouraging and empowering.<sup>19</sup> It is this 'prophetic' methodology that largely informs the present argument; the other methodological theme is my conviction that it is pointless to study the contents of a philosophy (such as *ubuntu*) in isolation — *in vitro* — without constant reference to the particular sociology of knowledge by which it came into being and by which it is perpetuated.

Serious problems await the intellectual if she or he fails to perceive utopian and prophetic statements as such, and instead proceeds to an empirical critique as if such statements are meant not primarily to muse and to exhort, but to give a factual description. Let me be allowed a personal example once more:

As beginning lecturers in sociology at the University of Zambia, in the early 1970s, my colleague Margareth Hall and I were invited by that institution's department of extra-mural studies, to tour the capitals of outlying provinces in order to lecture there on State President Kaunda's contributions to political philosophy and ideology, 'Zambian humanism'<sup>20</sup> — which had become the official philosophy of the country's ruling United National Independent Party (U.N.I.P.). Inexperienced, and still without any real-life understanding of African political and social realities, we fell into the trap of publicly and lengthily critiquing Zambian humanism for presenting a distorted, nostalgic, one-sidedly positive portrayal of South Central African village life in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The message was jocularly received in Mansa, Luapula Province, where U.N.I.P. had nothing to fear and where the two of us constituted a welcome, though juvenile, intellectual divertimento straight from the national capital. However, things were very different in Mongu. This provincial capital had recently been renamed Western Province to stress the central state's

supremacy after that province had for more than half a century entertained semi-independence as the Barotseland Protectorate.<sup>21</sup> Elections were approaching, Mongu was a stronghold for the opposition, and our visit coincided with a vote-rallying visit of U.N.I.P. leader Fines Bulawayo. In a formidable public speech the latter contested our right, as recently arrived expatriates straight from our European universities, to meddle in local political thought. For weeks we were kept in suspense, fearing to be declared prohibited immigrants, when finally a personal, remarkably appreciative letter from Mr Kaunda himself saved the situation.

Reflection on this *Zambian* case may help to bring out the dilemmas that attend, thirty years later, the concept of *ubuntu*.

Viewed as a moral and political exhortation and an expression of hope for a better future, *ubuntu* (just like *Zambian* humanism) creates a moral community, admission to which is not necessarily limited by biological ancestry, nationality, or actual place of residence. To participate in this moral community, therefore, is not a matter of birth-right in the narrower, parochial sense. If birth-right comes in at all, it is the birth-right of any member of the human species to express concern vis-à-vis the conditions under which her or his fellow-humans must live, and to act on that basis.<sup>22</sup> This moral community consists of people sharing a concern for the present and future of a particular local or regional society, seeking to add to the latter's resources, redressing its ills, and searching its conceptual and spiritual repertoire for inspiration, blueprints, models, encouragement in the process. In South Africa this is the programme of the *African renaissance*.<sup>23</sup> Afrocentricity<sup>24</sup> creates another such moral community, focusing not on a particular locality or region, but on the African continent as a whole. The people thus implicated may be expected to identify with each other and to be solidary in the pursuit of their concern. Whoever sets out to publicly deconstruct and even debunk the available conceptual and spiritual repertoire, dissociates from this moral community, rents its fabric, and jeopardises its project. From this perspective, Mr Bulawayo, in the above example, was certainly right; and we can understand how Mr Kaunda was able to save the situation by explicitly (re-)admitting, by his charismatic personal intervention, two young Europeans into this moral community.

Leaving the moral and politically mobilising aspect aside, and speaking at a more detached and abstract plane of analysis, we could say that whoever attempts such deconstruction of ideology is guilty of overlooking the distinction between locutionary ( $\approx$  factual), illocutionary ( $\approx$  putative) and perlocutionary ( $\approx$  persuasive) speech acts — a distinction that ever since Austin has proved so fertile.<sup>25</sup> It is easy to see that *Zambian* humanism and *ubuntu* are not in the first place factual descriptions. They primarily express the speaker's dreams about norms and practices that allegedly once prevailed in what are now to be considered *peripheral*

places (notably, within the intimacy of allegedly closely-knit villages, urban wards, and kin groups), while the speaker herself or himself is situated at or near the national or global centre. Such dreams about the past and the periphery are articulated, not because the speaker proposes to retire there personally or wishes to exhort other people to take up effective residence there, but because of their inspiring modelling power with regard to central national and even global issues — in other words because of these dreams' alleged persuasive / perlocutionary nature<sup>26</sup> outside the peripheral domain in which they are claimed to originate and to which they refer back.<sup>27</sup>

If, thirty years later, I have much less difficulty in identifying, in my capacity as a social actor in a concrete Southern African setting, with Zambian humanism, and with *ubuntu*, it is because I have enjoyed, for these many years, the (part-time) membership of the kind of local communities by distant reference to these two ideologies have been constructed in the first place. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s I have learned Zambian humanism and *ubuntu*, not so much as a value system spelled out explicitly (although there was that element, too: during court sessions, weddings, initiation rites, funerals), but especially more implicitly: as a diffuse value orientation informing the lives of others more local than I was then myself. I shared their lives as, alternately, they now applied and affirmed, then transgressed and rejected, these values, within the dynamics of conflicting pressures brought about by personal aspirations; by the sociability expected in a village and kin context; by the multiplicity and mutual incompatibility of their various roles and social ties; and by urban and modern goals, incentives and boundary conditions. It was in terms of this very value orientation that I was allowed to share their lives, and despite frequent transgressions both on my part and their own, this admission to their communities has been one of the greatest sources of pride and joy in my life. It is an honour from which I do not wish to dissociate myself permanently by an act of conceptual deconstruction — even though this refusal greatly complicates my life as both an analyst and a participant.<sup>28</sup> This stance has brought me to embrace the status of diviner-priest and to identify with and to vocally represent *Afrocentricity*.

*The value orientation of the village and the kin group is not standard in Southern Africa today*

The value orientation of the village and the kin group, as sketched above, is not within easy reach of the globalised, urban population that has become standard in Southern Africa. Outside contemporary village contexts, it is only selectively and superficially communicated to the Southern African population at large. Much as I

endorse Ramose's point that Southern Africa has something of great value to offer to the globalised world, we differ with regard to the role we assign to globalisation in this connection. For Ramose, globalisation is an outside phenomenon to be countered by *ubuntu*; I on the contrary argue that both contemporary Southern Africa, and *ubuntu* itself, are among the products of globalisation, and can only be understood as such products.

In the final analysis our two positions will turn out to be much more compatible than this juxtaposition suggests. We simply attach different meanings to *ubuntu*. Playing down the well-established hermeneutical insight that all representation is distortion, Ramose sees in *ubuntu* the value orientation of precolonial Southern African villages, which in his opinion is faithfully rendered in the contemporary academic statements of *ubuntu* philosophy. For Ramose, globalisation, while a world-wide process, in Southern Africa specifically stands for the European, Northern conquest, which has resulted in the large-scale destruction of *ubuntu*-based communities. From this perspective, a revival of *ubuntu* counters the course of Southern African history and is a remedy to the trauma caused by colonisation and by the imposition of capitalist relations of production. I on the other hand see *ubuntu* in the first place as a contemporary academic construct, called forth by the same forces of oppression, economic exploitation, and cultural alienation that have shaped Southern African society over the past two centuries. With Ramose I subsume these forces under the term of globalisation. However, on the basis of an extensive discussion of format I deny the identity between the academic evocation in the form of *ubuntu* philosophy, and the actual value orientation informing precolonial Southern African villages. Therefore, although *ubuntu* philosophy may be able to curb some (certainly not all) of the contemporary traumatic effects of globalisation/conquest, it is a new thing in a globalised format, not a perennial village thing in an authentic format.

Let me elaborate. In South Africa today (and by extension throughout Southern Africa) the established, socially approved and public norm, especially in urban areas, revolves around the emphatic consumption of globally circulating manufactured products; formal education; world religions; formal organisations that structure the state, industry, schools and churches, and civic self-organisation; and notions of authority, causality and truth patterned by constitutional democracy, the Enlightenment, and modern global science. For the Southern African urbanite, especially the urbanite under forty years of age, to fall short of this norm is to admit personal failure, backwardness, rebellion, sin. Of course, this means that, as a result of destructive Northern conquest and the subsequent imposition of colonialism and capitalism, there are hardly any ways left to render the contemporary urban and national situation meaningful in terms of an ancestral local cosmology. Urban consumptivism and cosmopolitanism form the other side of historic trauma.

In such a situation, religious and therapeutic leaders have a number of options open to them: from traditionalist defiance, via a combination of the old and the new,<sup>29</sup> to an emphatic rejection of local historic cultural forms (as among African Independent church leaders — who often however smuggle into their Christian practice historic local elements in disguise). To ordinary people without any religious or therapeutic specialism, the strong pressure of globalisation in the public culture leaves open mainly three strategies to adopt vis-à-vis local historic cultural and religious forms.

The first lay strategy, adequately recorded in the extensive descriptive literature, is that of joining any of the many thousands of Christian churches that have abounded in Southern Africa since the nineteenth century. Here an essentially imported symbolic idiom, often implicitly blended with local historic elements, creates ‘a place to feel at home’ – a sense of identity and agency largely dependent on the forces of globalisation, yet often capable of restoring dignity.

The second lay strategy, blatantly obvious yet relatively little reflected in the available social-science literature, is to become a ‘nominally-local non-initiate’. Today the majority of inhabitants of Southern Africa, and especially of the Republic of South Africa, have been so effectively exposed to globally circulating cultural, productive, reproductive and consumptive models, underpinned by equally global technologies of information and communication (including the printed press, radio, television, the Internet, and globally circulating styles of dress, self-definition, recreation and work), that they are no longer in any direct contact with, have no longer any real competence with regard to, the values, beliefs and images of Southern African village societies. If these non-initiates would wish to tap these resources (and their most likely reason for occasionally doing so would be a profound existential crisis calling for traditional therapy), they have to learn the values, beliefs and images of the village more or less from scratch, as if they were cultural strangers. It is for this reason that the practice of traditional healer in Southern Africa today in large part involves re-education and re-conversion of modernised clients: from nominal locals (who are effectively non-believers in historic African religion) into local initiates who are at least competent at the lay level and who can thus begin to play the role of therapeutic and ritual clients of these ritual specialists. For the same reason the images of traditional life circulating in urban Southern Africa are superficial and stereotyped at best, and often substantially beside the truth.

The third strategy, frequently pursued by moderately globalised persons in Southern Africa today yet only sporadically recorded in the social-science literature, is to submit publicly to the pressures of displaying a globalised modern culture, while in the more hidden niches of life, village forms are allowed to play some part, as long as this part is publicly hidden and dissimulated by the person in



question.

Thus one can easily be a smartly dressed office clerk pursuing a modern career during the day-time on weekdays, a patron of fashionable cocktail bars after work, and a prominent Christian church elder on most Sundays, spending the rest of the weekend on the construction of a modern house along municipal regulations at some site-and-service residential scheme, while on certain nights in the wee hours one frequents shebeens where alcohol consumption and casual sex are combined with the chanting of ancient songs featuring clans and totems and jokingly challenging those present from other clans, — only to return to the village (at a distance of up to a few hundred kilometres) once a month in order to engage there in ritual obligations imposed by the ancestral and High God cults. The latter activities would be kept completely invisible at the urban scene: one will deny — except before people hailing from the same village — all knowledge of and allegiance to them once back in town. In other words, village cultural and religious forms go into hiding under this strategy — they exist only underground and cannot be publicly articulated within the globalised urban space, given the fact that public culture is largely under the spell of Northern conquest and of the subsequent denial of local historic identity under South African apartheid and Zimbabwean colonialism.<sup>30</sup>

Incidentally, this third strategy, if pursued by intellectuals, is the main source of first-hand knowledge of village conditions as a basis for theorising on *ubuntu*.

Under the circumstances produced by these three strategies combined, the majority of the population of Southern Africa today cannot be properly said to know and to live *ubuntu* by virtue of any continuity with village life. They have to be educated to pursue (under the name of *ubuntu*) a *global and urban reformulation* of village values. And they learn this on the authority, not of traditional diviner-priests to whom one cannot appeal in the globalised space without great personal embarrassment, but of recognised opinion leaders of the globalised centre: politicians, university intellectuals. And the latter can only reach the globalised urban population if — and this is a point we shall have to come back to below — they cast their message in a format that has currency and legitimacy both for themselves and in the globalised space at large. *Ubuntu* as a model of thought therefore had to take on a globalised format in order to be acceptable to the majority of modern Southern Africans.

This brings us to an examination of the format under which the values, beliefs and images informing village and family life are historically produced. But let us first take a closer look at the most obvious context in which the concept of *ubuntu* is being applied, that of reconciliation at the central, urban sectors of post-apartheid South African.

*The anatomy of reconciliation and the role of intellectuals in Southern Africa today*

As a transformative concept in Southern African large-scale societies recently emerged from devastating armed conflict, *ubuntu*'s general application is in the sphere of reconciliation.

Now, reconciliation is called for whenever two conflicting parties are opposed to one another yet each may be recognised to have substantial reasons to claim that right is on their side; in such a situation (typical of intercultural contexts, when two life worlds, two universes of meaning, confront each other; but not limited to such intercultural contexts) no appeal to legal rules will offer a way out of the impasse, because it is precisely the subjective perception, on both sides, of what is right which has created the impasse. Reconciliation now creatively invents an argument of an higher order, in the light of which both parties may voluntarily let go of their subjective conviction of being right, persuaded by considerations of a higher value which, on second thoughts (and with a considerable amount of inventive prodding on the part of the conciliator) both parties turn out to share. Reconciliation therefore amounts to the active creative redefinition, by conceptual and emotive sleight-of-hand (in other words, the deliberate bending of reality for the sake of the solution of conflict), of a situation which, without such redefinition, could only remain a stale-mate.

This is how conflict settlement seems to work in numerous cases. In African societies, which tend to be incompletely domesticated by formal organisations including the state, interpersonal and intergroup conflict often dominate the social process. The social fabric is woven not out of the avoidance but out of the settlement of conflict, by elaborate social technologies (including litigation, ritual, reconciliation) which — at least at the small-scale and intermediate level — are among the most effective in the world.<sup>31</sup>

Such a model of reconciliation will go a long way towards the identification, and the solution, of the kind of conceptual, legal, religion and moral stale-mates which largely make up the contemporary, globalising, multicultural world. Reconciliation can be produced by sleight-of-hand, by pressing into service a Grand Narrative or Myth, which often has been invented *ad hoc* and which is ultimately performative and illusive.

If parties in a conflict define themselves by some kind of particularism that ties them to a locality, a form of production, gender, age, ethnicity, collective experience etc., then an appeal to universal mankind would provide the ultimate high-order argument, not just in the case of *ubuntu*, but in all human situations. We must realise that in many other contexts, outside Southern Africa, the appeal to

human-ness or humanity occurs in ways very similar to those proclaimed by *ubuntu*. The very term 'human rights' suggests so much: it defines not primarily — for such would be superfluous — the ontological entities to whom these rights apply (*humans*), but especially the extent of their application: universal, applying to *all* humans.<sup>32</sup>

Where do such effective Grand Narratives come from in the modern world? The term we owe to Lyotard,<sup>33</sup> but it is Foucault<sup>34</sup> who has called our attention to the fact that at least in the North Atlantic region during modern times, the societal legitimation and micropolitical underpinning which used to be provided by religion, since the Renaissance and certainly since the Enlightenment has increasingly derived from scientific knowledge production. First in the North Atlantic, and subsequently (after the colonial conquest and its postcolonial consolidation under U.S.A. hegemony) on a global scale, science has become the main recognised source of truth, morals, rights and justifications. A conciliator seeking to invent a higher-order reason to bring about reconciliation between two parties locked in a stalled argument, could do not better than to appeal to the world of academia, finding there a new argument which the conflictive dialogue between the parties has hitherto overlooked.

The dominance of North Atlantic scholarly, legal and expressive forms, and the commodified formats defined in those contexts (books, articles, Internet documents, videos, movies, CDs etc.) mean that also arguments originating outside the North Atlantic, from a totally different and historically fairly unrelated context, stand a good chance of gaining greater conviction if paraded in the name of global (but effectively, as far as their most recent history is concerned, North Atlantic) scientific knowledge production. It is the irony of many identity constructions and identity claims outside the North Atlantic today, that in order to succeed, in order to be taken seriously by their actual and potential adherents and by others including national and international governmental bodies, they need to be formulated in the academic and commodified format stipulated (even imposed) under North Atlantic hegemony.<sup>35</sup> A familiar technique to sweep under the table the intolerable submission to North Atlantic models which this process entails, consist in playing down the North Atlantic nature of the format, calling it universal or global instead. And it is quite possible that a genuine transformation, a genuine trans-hegemonic redefinition, takes place in the dominant format, once it is successfully appropriated, adapted and improved upon by intellectual and social constructors who are not in or from the North Atlantic. Elsewhere I have explored the global yet North Atlantic positioning of Information and Communication Technology, in the light of its subsequent, fairly successful African appropriation.<sup>36</sup> There I have argued that it is not the denial of

- (a) North Atlantic antecedents, nor of
- (b) successful African appropriation and enculturation,

but the recognition of the irresolvable polarity, of the tension relationship between (a) and (b), which provides us with a model helping to understand the cultural and political contradictions of the modern, globalised world. Applying the same insight (which I consider fundamental for intercultural philosophy), we could acknowledge the tension between ancestral and global formats and contents in *ubuntu*, without seeking to resolve that tension by opting for either of these complementary poles and denying authenticity and legitimacy to the other pole. Let us now investigate both poles in their own right.

*The format of values, beliefs and images informing village and family life*

For a proper understanding of the nature and the societal locus of the concept of *ubuntu* in Southern Africa today it is of the greatest importance to appreciate the specific format under which the ideas, beliefs and images informing today's village communities and family situations present themselves. Both as an anthropologist and as a diviner-priest I have familiarised myself somewhat with these formats. In these contexts, the village and family world-view is presented by the people as time-honoured, ancestral, unchanging. But this may be deceptive, after the by now all-too-familiar model of the 'invention of tradition'.<sup>37</sup> All we know for sure is:

- that these values, beliefs and images are propounded *today*,
- that (like any world-view wherever and whenever) they inform people's thought and behaviour *only partially and far from totally*, and
- that even in the remotest places and most intimate, most strongly signified situations these values, beliefs and images are *often confronted with antagonistic pressures deriving from more globalised domains of contemporary Southern Africa*.

Also as ethnographers and analysts we are often brought to project the world-view we encounter during our research, back into the past, at least by a few centuries, perhaps the time of the emergence of the Bantu language family, or even a few further to the invention of agriculture and animal husbandry — the productive basis of the African village. It is especially tempting to see in today's village life an unaltered continuation of the normative patterns governing nineteenth-century villages as peopled by the direct ancestors of present-day villagers.<sup>38</sup> But we could only be reasonably sure of such continuity on the basis of

extensive historical research, which (although frequently conducted and leading to numerous published products, whose enumeration and critique however is beyond the present scope) is severely handicapped by the paucity of vernacular nineteenth-century sources and by the fact that the nineteenth century is sinking below the horizon of living memory and reliable oral tradition. What is more, on theoretical, epistemological and comparative grounds we have to suspect that the Southern African village and the social and normative patterns that governed it, instead of constituting a perennial lived reality, have to some extent been a creation of colonial administration, missionary activities, industrial relations based on labour migration, and social anthropological aggregate description.<sup>39</sup> Anyway, even if it ever were a reality, in the course of the twentieth century the Southern African village increasingly became a myth<sup>40</sup> — not only in the hands of anthropologists, administrators, industrialists and missionaries, but also as re-appropriated, from such alien sources, into African perceptions and expressions of identity and nostalgia — as happened also to the concepts of tribe, ethnicity, and culture.<sup>41</sup> In other words, we cannot be sure that even at the level of late-twentieth-century villages in Southern Africa, the concept of *ubuntu* (or *Zambian humanism*, for that matter) is more than perlocutionary or illocutionary: constituting not so much the enunciation of an actual practice, but at best a local ideology to which appeal is made whenever actual practice is initiated (e.g. at initiation rites and weddings) or whenever actual practice is argued (in conflict settlement, divination) to stray too far from this ideal. On such occasions, and in line with my general characterisation of reconciliation as presented above, utterances invoking principles of sociability reminiscent of those which Southern African philosophers have summarised under the heading of *ubuntu*, are set in a context of elaborate rhetorical arts in which the available cultural material is presented in a strategic, eclectic, and innovative manner. These verbal elements are often so complex, cryptic, multi-layered and internally contradictory,<sup>42</sup> archaic, and multi-referential,<sup>43</sup> that the socio-ritual events in which they feature produce *implied* meaning (as a vehicle of sociability within the village and the kin group, but also leaving open the possibility of the opposite of sociability) much more than that they articulate *explicit and codifiable* meaning. Traditional religious leaders and therapists (locally called *banganga*, *dingaka*, *basangoma* etc.), as well as village elders, chiefs and the specialists (both women and men) supervising puberty initiation, are the guardians and articulators of this world-view. Their specific ritual, therapeutic, linguistic (cf. proverbs, archaic and honorific expressions, tabooed words), legal and historical knowledge, in the way in which it is socially utilised in its own proper context, is not systematised, not codified. It is oral, vernacular, rambling, situational. It does not exist in the itemised, linearised, generalised, objectified format of discursive academic descriptions whose globally converging format has crystallised out in the

course of the last few millennia, in a context of literacy, the state, formal organisations, world religions, world-wide trade, universalising science, and other globalising tendencies. The embeddedness of the Southern African local specialist knowledge in the day-to-day physical and social environment of the rural community and its productive and reproductive processes lends to the local expressions of this knowledge a tacit meaningfulness, a powerful self-evidence, which is practically impossible to reproduce or even to obliquely indicate or suggest outside this original setting except perhaps — *under a totally different format* — by the elaborate technology of the imagination at the disposal of the novelist and the film-maker. I have never witnessed the technical terms *ubuntu* (or local morphological equivalents) or *Zambian humanism* to be used as a matter of course, of accepted parlance, in these concrete situations of the village and the family. At best they were used as in quasi-quotation, introducing into the vernacular world of the village and the family a stilted (and often somewhat ironical) reference to the outside world of literacy, politics and ideology. These terms do not belong to the format of expression proper to those situations. The *meanings* covered by those terms are admittedly at home in the village and the family but (because of the various perspectives of *-ntu* as discussed in the opening section of this argument, and because of the complex, largely implicit way of expressing local social models as indicated in the present section) this semantic complex cannot be said to be articulated predominantly, let alone exclusively, by reference to various nominal forms of the root *-ntu*.

*Ubuntu as a deceptively vernacular term for an etic concept formulated in a globally circulating format*

Therefore, to describe the values, beliefs and images at operation at the village and family level as ‘the Southern African indigenous philosophy of *ubuntu*’ amounts to a rendering (in discursive academic, specifically philosophical, terms which exemplify globally circulating conceptual usage) of ideas that are certainly *implied* in Southern African village practices and ideas but that exist there under different, much more diffuse and situationally varying, linguistic formats. *Ubuntu* in the sense of the conceptual complex which modern exponents of *ubuntu* philosophy claim to exist around that term, is at best a transformative rendering, in a globally mediated, analytical language, of vernacular practices and concepts which are very far from having a one-to-one linguistic correspondence with the phraseology of *ubuntu* philosophy.

Half a century ago the social anthropologist and linguist Pike coined the paired concepts of *emic* and *etic* to capture a similar distinction.<sup>44</sup> The systema-

tisation of *ubuntu* as an alleged indigenous philosophy is an *etic* practice that remotely, analytically and transformingly represents *emic* i.e. vernacular practices that take place in peripheral contexts in present-day Southern Africa, and that in meaning, but not in strict format, may more or less correspond with the explicit, rational, discursive statements as published.

The self-proclaimed experts on *ubuntu* form a globally-informed, Southern African intellectual elite who, remote in place and social practice from the *emic* expressions at the village level which they seek to capture, have officially coined the concept of *ubuntu* as a cornerstone Southern African self-reflexive ethnography.

While the format in which the philosophy of *ubuntu* is cast in contemporary treatises is that of the Western tradition of discursive philosophical argument, these intellectual productions have a more specific ancestry in the spate of writings which, under the general heading of 'African philosophy', have been published by African intellectuals in the second half of the twentieth century CE.

Valentin Mudimbe, a famous analyst and critic of this form of intellectual production, has characterised a major division of such writings (those produced by Roman Catholic or post-Catholic intellectuals with a seminary education) as 'the liberation of difference' — of the difference that speaking in an African voice makes — in the context of the White-dominated emergent intellectual climate of colonial and early post-colonial Africa, under strong North Atlantic cultural and political hegemony.<sup>45</sup> In order to pinpoint the peculiar handling of historic African cultural and religious material in the context of the intellectual genre of 'African philosophy', Mudimbe coined the term *retrodiction* ('speaking backwards'): African clerical intellectuals like Kagame and Mveng are said to have engaged in retrodiction when they reconstructed and vicariously represented a precolonial, pre-Christian African village-based life-world, which they themselves no longer lived nor believed in, and which yet was dear to them as a source of inspiration and pride —, as an identity recaptured in the face of the North Atlantic rejection of Black people and their powers of thought and agency. In these, in majority francophone, attempts to reconstruct, re-appropriate, and assert a philosophical perspective that is Western in format yet is proclaimed to be pre-colonial African in content, historic<sup>46</sup> African thought is depicted as revolving on a human-centred ontology, which African authors and sympathetic European observers<sup>47</sup> already have a century ago habitually cast in terms of the same Bantu-language root *-ntu* that was later, to emerge as the cornerstone of *ubuntu* philosophy.

In Southern Africa the liberation of Black difference through philosophical (as distinct from literary and artistic) production has lagged behind to that in West and East Africa. The adoption of the globally circulating genre of African philosophy by Southern African intellectuals was retarded by the language barrier

between English / Afrikaans on the one hand and French on the other; by the relatively late rise to popularity of African philosophy among anglophone intellectuals (including African intellectuals working or studying there) in the North Atlantic region; and by the general intellectual isolation in which South Africa was shrouded as a result of the international boycott to which the apartheid state was subjected in the 1970s and especially 1980s.<sup>48</sup>

*Ubuntu* is a tool for transformation in a context of globalisation. As an *etic* rendering in a globally mediated format, it has emerged, and takes its form and contents, in the realities of post-apartheid South Africa today. The concept of humanity is by definition extremely wide, with many different applications in many different specific contexts. Of these, the current use of the concept of *ubuntu* in South African political and management discourse is likely to be restricted to a few eminently ‘usable’ varieties — usable, not because they betray or deny the past, but because they help to negotiate the future despite the divisiveness of the past and the present. Therefore, looking for the ‘true’ precolonial or nineteenth-century meaning of *ubuntu* through etymological, ethnographic and historical procedures would be based on a misunderstanding of what *ubuntu* is, and is meant for. Nonetheless, like most ideologies, *ubuntu* is legitimated by the claim (which in principle amounts to a locutionary statement, open to empirical substantiation or falsification) that this concept sums up the ancestral value orientation of the majority of the Southern African globalised urban population today.

In the works of Southern African writers on *ubuntu*, that concept is presented as a major philosophical achievement, as one of Africa’s great intellectual and moral contributions to mankind as a whole. Here we should distinguish between two points of view:

- (a) the systematic, expert, and loving reconstruction of African systems of thought, and
- (b) the view of culture as integrated and unified,<sup>49</sup> as if organised around one alleged key concept artificially raised to star status, in this case the concept of *ubuntu*.

As a long-standing intellectual endeavour of the greatest value, the pursuit of (a) has been, and will continue to be, one of the important tasks of cultural anthropology, African philosophy and intercultural philosophy. This pursuit depends, for its epistemological acceptability, on explicit, collectively underpinned scholarly procedures whose specific nature is critically defined by the disciplinary community of Africanists researchers in continuous debate. In this process the contribution from the part of African researchers and non-academic sages<sup>50</sup> is more and more substantial, and more and more taken into account. The present argument



is a contribution to that endeavour. The current *ubuntu* industry, however, has largely resorted to (b). Distantly, and without recourse to explicit and systematic methodological and empirical procedures, but instead driven by academic philosophers' and management consultants' intuitive linguistic analyses and childhood reminiscences. If *ubuntu* is to be Africa's great gift to the global world of thought, it is primarily not the African villagers' gift, but that of the academic and managerial codifiers who allowed themselves to be distantly and selectively inspired by village life: ignoring the ubiquitous conflicts and contradictions, the oppressive immanence of the world-view, the witchcraft beliefs and accusations, the constraint oscillation between trust and distrust, and merely appropriating and representing the bright side.

*Why ubuntu can yet be expected to make a difference*

Having said this, the major question remains: Can *ubuntu* philosophy be expected to bring the positive change advocated in its name? And how would we substantiate our answer to this question?

Statements of *ubuntu* philosophy suggest that, now that the mists of North Atlantic hegemonic subjugation and the ensuing self-censorship have been lifted from the minds of African thinkers, the true African thought can come out in an unadulterated form that, since the urban, modern consumers of such a restated philosophy can largely identify as Africans, will inspire their actions in majority-rule South Africa and Zimbabwe for the better. We have to take considerable distance from this suggestion, without totally dismissing it.

The production of *ubuntu* philosophy is better described in the following terms:

A regional intellectual elite, largely or totally weaned away from the village and kin contexts to which *ubuntu* philosophy explicitly refers, employs a globally circulating and in origin primarily North Atlantic format of intellectual production in order to articulate, from a considerable distance, African contents reconstructed by linguistic, ethnographic and other means which are largely unsystematic and intuitive.

'Liberation of Black difference' as an expression is not far from the creation of a moral community of people concerned about the present and future of Southern Africa, which in the opening paragraphs of this argument I identified as the obvious goal of the *ubuntu* philosophy. Since most of the forces that have shaped the societies of contemporary Southern Africa can be subsumed under the heading of globalisation, it stands to reason that an intellectual product meant to overcome the negative effects of these forces has to be global in format, even

though its contents is largely inspired by the local intimacy of village and kin group. If in concrete situations of social transformation and conflict the appeal to *ubuntu* is going to make a positive difference, the global format lends recognition and respectability in ways the original, implicit normative orientation of contemporary Southern African village and kin situation could never claim in an urban, globalised context. In this respect the intellectual exponents of *ubuntu* may be said to have created a potentially powerful tool. Since the tool is to be used exhortatively in Southern African situations that are largely globalised, it does not really matter whether the ethnographic and linguistic underpinnings of *ubuntu* philosophy are empirically and epistemologically impeccable in the way they should be if *ubuntu* philosophy were primarily locutionary (an *etic* restatement of *emic* concepts and agency), instead of an exhortative instrument at the service of modern urban society at large. Being prophetic, *ubuntu* philosophy seeks to address fundamental ills in the make-up of urban, globalised Southern Africa: the social life world of its academic authors. Being utopian, the images of concrete social life featuring in statements of *ubuntu* do not have to correspond to any lived reality anywhere — they are allowed to refer to ‘No-Place’, and to merely depict, through social imagery, desired changes to be brought about by an application of the precepts contained in *ubuntu*.

How then could *ubuntu*, conjuring up images of a viable and intact village society, be expected to make a difference in the utterly globalised context of urban Southern Africa and its conflict-ridden social, industrial, ethnic, and political scene? Would not the rural reference, because of its obvious irrelevance in the urban globalised context, annul any advantages that may be derived from the globalised format of *ubuntu* philosophy?

I can see at least three reasons to expect considerable success for *ubuntu*.

One reason I take from the analogy with girl’s initiation rites in contemporary urban Zambia,<sup>51</sup> a social context that (despite its poverty and defective infrastructure) is in many respects comparable to South Africa and Zimbabwe. Girl’s initiation rites are cast in a time-honoured rural idiom revolving on female identity, as underpinned by a detailed knowledge and appreciation of the female body, and a celebration and sacralisation of productive and reproductive capacities, often in forms and with emphasis way out of line with current urban life. One would have expected such rites to decline and disappear, but on the contrary they are only becoming more and more popular, especially among the middle classes: the construction of female identity with powerful, ancient symbols is apparently a lasting, major concern even, or especially, in the face of globalisation. *Ubuntu* could serve an analogous purpose.

In the second place, the symbolic technologies offered by local village-based symbols, concepts and practices, be they girl’s initiation, *ubuntu*, or otherwise,

constitute a form of symbolic empowerment for the very people who (in Zambia in the late 1950s, in Southern Africa in the 1970s and 1980s) fought to attain majority rule and cast off the yoke of North Atlantic cultural and symbolic, as well as political, military and economic, dominance. *Ubuntu* offers the appearance of an ancestral model to them that is credible and with which they can identify, regardless of whether these urban, globalised people still observe ancestral codes of conduct — of course in most respects they do not, regardless of whether the ancestral codes are rendered correctly (often they are not).

In the third place, *ubuntu* is especially appealed to when it comes to the settlement of seemingly unsolvable conflicts and insurmountable contradictions — such as massively dominate life in Southern Africa today. Against the background of the anatomy of reconciliation discussed above, *ubuntu*, when appealed to in the modern management of urban and national conflicts, can be effective, but *not* because it summarises the internalised cultural orientations of the Africans involved in such conflict — very far from it, for these Africans are largely globalised in their world-view and practices, and are no more governed by village rules and allegiances than people in similar urban and national arenas in other continents. Despite having rural and small-scale face-to-face relationships as its referent, *ubuntu* can be effective, in the first place because it is appreciated as an African thing, but in the second place and especially because, despite its globally-derived format, it introduces non-global, particularistic and intimate elements in the very heart of Southern African globalisation. *Ubuntu* can work precisely because it is novel, out of place there where it is most appealed to. It allows the conflict regulator to introduce an unexpected perspective to which (for historical, identity and strategic reasons) few parties could afford to say ‘no’.

### *Limitations and dangers of ubuntu*

*Ubuntu* then appears as a lubricant of social relations at the globalised urban centre of contemporary Southern African society, as a *deus ex machina* offering a way out where little else can. If it helps to overcome otherwise insurmountable contradictions, it produces sociability and alleviates tension. It may do so in situations where avoiding or overcoming the manifestation of open conflict is to the benefit of all parties involved.

When in contemporary South African situations of transition an appeal is made to *ubuntu*, this means in the first place an invocation of the fellow-humanity of all involved in the concrete situation at hand. It is a way of saying:

‘Admittedly, we have so many things that divide us, in terms of age, gender,

class, wealth, somatic appearance, cultural style, language, ethnicity, political allegiance; all these identities refer to past experiences which may have been very different and in the course of which the various sets of human beings which make up the present concrete situation may have found themselves in opposite but complementary positions of exploitation, suffering, violence, denial, wrong-doing. It is no use denying these differences and the historical experiences that are tied to them; it is in fact impossible to deny them. Yet, by stressing our common, shared humanity we hope to define a common ground which may help us to find a way out of the impasse which our historical difference have ended us up in.<sup>52</sup>

So far so good. 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, co-religionists, fellow-Africans, or any other category far wider than the comfortably narrow scope of the family. It is in short the *perplexing* and *demobilising* choice of the wrong level of aggregation. An appeal to *ubuntu* implies that the speaker can see no other grounds for identification between the locals involved in a given Southern African situation, than their belonging to mankind at large (including the inhabitants of Patagonia, the ancient Mesopotamians, probably even the Neanderthals), thus implicitly taking for real and insurmountable the divisions of class, somatic appearance, ethnicity, language, gender, religious denomination and political affiliation that – once grotesquely emphasised under the apartheid and colonial state – still enter into any concrete social situation in Southern Africa. Appealing, in any Southern African gathering of local citizens, members of the same local community, the same polity, speaking the same *linguae francae*, having lived through the same traumatic experience of apartheid, enjoying the same benefit of South Africa's restored esteem and economic hegemony among the nations of Africa and the world — appealing, in such a context, merely to a shared humanity, amounts to denying, in effect, the entire moral, historical, informational and cultural *local* basis out of which any nation-state consists, even a traumatised and globalised one like South Africa.

Moreover, I fear that *ubuntu* would also serve as a lubricant or a pacifier (in the child-care sense) in situations where conflict is real and should not be obscured by smothering it under a blanket of mutually recognised humanity of the parties

involved. I shall briefly discuss two such instances: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (T.R.C.), and continuing class conflict after the attainment of majority rule.

Probably the most widely advertised public application of the concept of *ubuntu* (although the concept itself remained largely implicit in that context) was that of the T.R.C., which reviewed the crimes against humanity perpetrated under apartheid, and offered the perpetrators re-acceptance into the new South African society at no greater personal cost than admission of guilt and offering of apologies. Here *ubuntu*, from a quality that a person could have or have not, obtained a relational dimension: it became something that one could generously extend to those who had shown to have too little of it. The semantic field of *ubuntu* came to include '*the perpetrator's restored personhood as granted by the very individual they wronged.*' Underlying this is a concept of reconciliation that is profoundly Christian. It can be no accident that no traditional diviner-priests (guardians of the ancestral world-view) participated in the T.R.C. context, where they could have articulated historic Southern African viewpoints on evil, sin, i.e. not only the possibility *but also the limitations* of expiation. In the absence of such experts, the concept of *ubuntu* was to supply what little traditional guidance was allowed to inform the situation. The Black African population of South Africa, having been immensely wronged by White people with a European background, was in the end not even free to define the terms under which it would be prepared to leave this past behind them, and to include regional historic elements of an African culture of justice and expiation among these terms; no, even the terms of reconciliation had to be set by European and White dominance — even if this dominance had the amicable, integrity-exuding, and unmistakably Black face of Archbishop Tutu. The T.R.C., and the occasional appeal to *ubuntu* in that connexion, conveyed the suggestion that unconditional forgiveness and cleansing merely on the basis of a verbal admission of guilt is part of the Southern African ancestral cultural heritage, and who has ever heard of an appeal being made against an ancestral cultural heritage? Such an appeal would place one, to repeat my earlier expression, outside the moral community which the T.R.C. proceedings tried to create and reinforce at all costs. But, as we have seen above when discussing *-ntu* under its socio-legal aspect, it may be misleading to suggest that a Roman-Anglican Christian model of confession and absolution epitomises the ancient Southern African world-view as subsumed under the concept of *ubuntu*. The perpetrators of atrocities under the apartheid state might qualify as sorcerers and might have been treated accordingly. For such treatment a number of precepts are available, ranging from capital punishment to re-admission into the folds of humanity, but the latter at far greater personal costs than just a verbal admission of guilt. This is one major example of how under contemporary conditions *ubuntu* is pressed into service at

the centre of national political affairs, in mystifying ways that deny or pervert time-honoured African values, under the pretence of articulating those very values. In years to come South African society may yet have to pay the price for the massive and manipulative repression of resentment and anger caused by the historically questionable use of *ubuntu* in the context of the T.R.C.

Something similar can be seen in the handling of *ubuntu* in the context of continuing and acerbating class conflict in Southern Africa today. The transformation of Zimbabwe after 1980, and that of South Africa after 1990, has involved a massive reshuffle of social, economic and political power. In both countries, the White-Black contradiction that dominated the decades before majority rule, has resulted in the overthrow of White supremacy, but in most other respects the fundamental relations of inequality were not radically confronted: those between town and country, between land-owners and the landless, between middle classes and the urban poor, between men and women, between the educated and the non-educated, and between the middle-aged and the young. Here *ubuntu* often does serve as a liberating, empowering and identity-building transformative concept in the hands of those who wish to build the country. But it may also be wielded as a mystifying concept in the hands of those who, after the post-apartheid reshuffle, were able to personally cross over to the privileged side of the huge class divide, without being over-sensitive to the wider social costs of their individual economic and status advancement. This process is widely noticeable in South Africa today. It is what people euphemistically call the Africanisation of that country's economic and public sphere. In such a situation of post-apartheid class formation, Africans with widely different access to power resources increasingly confront each other in conflict over scarce resources within industry, formal organisations, neighbourhood affairs, politics. Is there not the danger here of *ubuntu* being turned into a populist, mystifying ideology, dissimulating the real class conflict at hand, and persuading the more powerless Blacks involved to yield to the more powerful ones as soon as the latter wave the flag of *ubuntu*? The newly emerging Black elite seem to be saying to their opponents:

‘How could you, our fellow-Africans, possibly question our decisions? We are merely applying, in yours interest as well as in ours, our most cherished common African ancestral heritage, our *ubuntu*!...<sup>53</sup>

For a Black South African already dropping out of the process of material self-advancement in the post-apartheid era, calling the bluff of such manipulative usage of *ubuntu* would only be asking for further marginalisation. Thus the concept emphatically meant for the restoration of identity and for re-empowerment, risks to be deployed against the very people whose ancestral culture it seeks to celebrate.

With a crime rate that is by far the highest in the world, post-apartheid South Africa needs, in addition to the sociability of *ubuntu*, more factual, locutionary, and urban-based tools of self-redress — including a profound commitment to class analysis and gender analysis; an admittance that certain contradictions are simply too real to smother under expressions of sociability and populism; a positive appreciation of legitimate force, even violence (if truly monopolised by a truly democratic state), in the creation and maintenance of socially essential boundaries — boundaries that protect the values they enclose, instead of excluding a majority of people from partaking of those values; and a sustained reflection on the dangers of repressed anger, resentment, and grief.

Without the further elaboration stipulated in the previous paragraph, *ubuntu* runs the risk of sinking back to the semantic field where the kindred words *mntu* and *bantu* (as well as the originally Arabic *kaffir*, ‘infidel’) were situated for many decades in South Africa under apartheid: pejorative expressions for financially robbed, easily exploitable, legally unprotected, socially excluded and mentally broken Black subject-hood.

That *ubuntu* carries, in principle, the potential of referring, not to the liberation of Black African difference but to its subjugation to White class interests, and by extension to elite interests in general, became clear to me when in 1999, as a member of a team further comprising Mogobe Ramose, Vernie February and the local Roman Catholic pastor, we interviewed a village elder in a rural district about 60 km north of Pretoria. A straight-forward translation of the (Nguni) concept of *ubuntu* was impeded by the fact that the conversation was conducted in the Tswana language (where *ubuntu* translates as *botho*). Expecting to trigger, with our magical concept, a full indigenous philosophical account on local values of human-ness, this unmistakable ‘sage’ utterly failed to oblige, and instead treated us to a long and shocking story on the history of his village throughout the twentieth century — a history in which *bantu*-hood (for that is another, obvious meaning of the word *ubuntu*) was clearly conceived, in the apartheid sense, as the experience of suffering at the hands of local White self-styled landowners.

This is a usage of the root *-ntu* that was explicitly acknowledged in the beginning of this paper when setting out that root’s semantic field. I suspect that this meaning continues to adhere, marginally and implicitly, even to the most transformative, liberating usage of *ubuntu* in modern urban Southern Africa, as an ironical reminder that this concept carries, in the best dialectic (Marx) or deconstructive (Derrida) traditions, the seeds of its own opposite or denial. We must not underrate such a concept’s rhetorical and manipulative potential, also for

mystification and not only for positive exhortation.

In the light of these moral, humanitarian and political concerns, I may be justified in presenting this critical argument. Probably for some exponents of *ubuntu* this criticism will expel me, after all, from the moral community for whose creation *ubuntu* philosophy was intended in the first place. Such an expulsion may not entirely be in the spirit of the concept of *ubuntu*. Perhaps a moral community constructed, with some explicable success, by *ubuntu*, is not the only moral community that Southern Africa needs in these difficult times. In addition to the entrancing (and often deceptively vulnerable, manipulable and ephemeral) communities created by the articulation of identity, invented tradition, and common humanity, it is no shame to also aspire to membership of the moral community that (in the best radical, Marxist tradition of South African intellectual life) sees the intellectual discharge of solidarity in the expression of social contradictions, and not in their dissimulation.

*Conclusion: The vindication of ubuntu as an escape from violence*

However, if I would conclude my argument at this point it would defeat its whole purpose. Certainly, African philosophers theorising about *ubuntu* invite academic criticism simply by their very choice of adopting an academic, globalised format of expression. I have offered such criticism in good faith. However, in conclusion it is imperative to make explicit, and to neutralise, a number of fundamental dangers, and, if possible, to nip a number of possible misunderstandings in the bud.

Has the purpose of my argument been to humiliate my African colleagues and friends, an arrogant exercise in *Besserwissen* ('narrow-minded and fanatical "knowing better"'), with me going at length to reduce to a specific sociology of globalised knowledge the position of the academic authors of *ubuntu* philosophy, whilst at the same time portraying my own knowledge production as informed by timeless, universal scientifically underpinned truth? If that had been my intention I would commit a great injustice, considering the fact that *ubuntu*, while being an academic philosophy emulating a globalised format, is in the first place born out of pain, exclusion, justified anger, and the struggle to regain dignity and identity in the face of Northern conquest and oppression. When I situated the total transformation of Southern African societies under White domination, the need to produce *ubuntu*, and the production of *ubuntu* itself, in a context of globalisation, this globalisation was clearly not a neutral process (not the myth of universal limitless access propagated by liberal proponents of globalisation) but a form of violence. Surely one does not help erase the effects of such violence by an argument that boils down to more violence from the North, and leave it at that.



One cannot present elements of an anatomy of reconciliation (like I did above) yet end the argument in a formidable contradiction between Southern theoreticians of *ubuntu* on the one hand, and me as a Northern critic on the other. Therefore let us go one step further, and admit the amazing similarities that exist between these two parties. The reader has been looking in on a frank, dogged, at times heated conversation between members of the same family, who have grown up without totally casting off the irritations they caused in each other when still children, yet know that they are irrevocably inseparable, produced by a shared history. If the format of the *ubuntu* philosophy (*and of all African philosophy, for that matter*) is globalised and alien to the village and kinship matters it tries to explicate – so is the format of the present argument, of intercultural philosophy, and of ethnography. The same paradox applies to both sides: that of being at the same time inevitably and fundamentally distortive, and yet constituting a serious and valuable interpretation carried by the quest for integrity. If the relationship between the theoreticians of *ubuntu*, and the peripheral situations they try to represent, are distant, strained, contradictory, vicarious, yet intimate and legitimate – so is the relationship between the present writer and the communities of Southern African communities of which he is a part-time member. If globalisation produced Southern African intellectuals including the theoreticians of *ubuntu*, so it produced social anthropologists and caused them to insert themselves into Southern African peripheral communities. If the production of *ubuntu* philosophy is prophetic and utopian, so – as I admitted explicitly above – is my own stance in this argument. If the theoreticians of *ubuntu* produce a Grand Narrative, so are other Grand Narratives hovering over my own side of the argument: the idea that scientific ethnography produces valid knowledge, and the idea that one can place oneself outside the course of hegemonic history by identifying closely with the peripheral victims of that history. If the theoreticians of *ubuntu* readily oscillate between perlocutionary blueprints and locutionary factual description of village and family situations, so do I oscillate between on the one hand an hermeneutical reading of my own predicaments as a post-ethnographer, and on the other (*vis-à-vis* the *ubuntu* theoreticians) a critical stance that cannot possibly be hermeneutical but amounts to ideological critique. The precarious nature of the relationship between *ubuntu* theoreticians and Southern African villages has everything to do with the history of Northern violence and cultural destruction, which has produced globalised African intellectuals but at the double cost of expelling them from a local home of meaningfulness, and of nearly destroying these homes anyway. For a European professional anthropologist, becoming a Southern African diviner-priest, as well as becoming the adoptive son of king Kahare Kabambi of the Nkoya people (my two main credentials when – however uncertainly and inconvincingly – posing as more or less of a local to Southern African affairs), manifest the same

commitment to countering the course of Southern African history as is at the root of *ubuntu* philosophy.

The point is not whether my part-time membership of Southern African peripheral communities has created a setting where, through the skilful application of the professional empirical procedures of state-of-the-art ethnography, more valid knowledge is being produced than by the introspection, childhood memories, linguistic reflection and occasional rural visits of the theoreticians of *ubuntu*. On the contrary, the very idea of such superiority would mean that we are still blind to the power implications of launching, and contesting, *ubuntu*. Claiming an ethnographically underpinned superior insight simply means yet more Northern violence, inviting Southern counter-violence. The point is that any social situation in which one truly, existentially takes part, breeds through the experience of such participation a subjective reality from which one cannot and will not distance oneself. My 'insights' into the peripheral Southern African situations that I have lived intensively and for a long time, are inescapably true to me, not because I applied state-of-the-art ethnographic techniques in those settings and therefore feel (but are not) justified to lay claim to epistemologically validated truth for my ethnographic pronouncements – no, they are (subjectively) true in the first place *because they are me*, because I constitute myself as a person on the basis of those experiences, because I am not in the least prepared to suffer the self-destruction that a relative stance vis-à-vis these experiences would entail. Exactly the same mechanism informs the situation of the *ubuntu* theoreticians: their pronouncements on the essential African village before, or outside the reach of, Northern destruction are true, not for procedural epistemological reasons but because such pronouncements sum up an uncompromisable personal identity constituted out of the experiences of exclusion, humiliation, anger and contestation.

It is not mutually exclusive, monopolistic claims to truth and sanity (and the attending responses in terms of ideological critique, and psychoanalysis), but differences of interests,<sup>54</sup> that divide the participants in this argument's conversation on *ubuntu*. And these interests are not primarily academic status and honour, nor struggles over the right to officiate on African philosophy, nor struggles over a birthright, but *the interest of not being destroyed by the implications of the other's self-construction*.

If I am not mistaken, *ubuntu* contains an effective precept for the management of such interests: the secret of the village headman's skill who, while lacking all formal sanctions, yet through the imaginative power of reconciliation manages to safeguard the conflicting interests of the members of his little community, without destroying any of them. But those who have lived Southern African village life, also know that these subtle and eminently constructive skills often go unappreciated when running counter to the individual village members'

short-term self-interests, and then a rumour of sorcery readily attaches to the incumbent of the headmanship.

*Ultimately, then, this conversation about ubuntu revolves on the question of how to avoid or domesticate violence:* the violence that is produced by text (the texts of African philosophy, intercultural philosophy, Africanist ethnography); the violence that is produced by representation (by intellectuals, of aspects of human life that are lost to them or that never were theirs in the first place); the violence that is produced by the formal organisation (of academic disciplines, their validity-underpinning epistemological procedures, and the built-in rivalry between their members; of the colonial state; of the capitalist economy); the violence that is produced by globalisation as a vehicle of all the above. Seen in this light, the concept of *ubuntu* is historically determined to constitute a bone of contention, to remind us of past violence and to lead us into new violence, until we realise that above all *ubuntu* is the invitation to confront this determination and, together, rise above such violence. Only then can our work, on or about *ubuntu*, benefit the poor and powerless people of Southern Africa, with whom the theoreticians of *ubuntu* clearly identify even more than I do.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The ethnographic passages in the present paper are largely based on my anthropological and historical fieldwork in Zambia and Botswana, with extensions to Zimbabwe and South-Africa, since 1971, for which I owe acknowledgments to: my family; to my African friends and relatives participating in these researches; to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands; the Trust Fund, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, The Netherlands; the University of Zambia; the Ministry of Lands, Local Government and Housing, Botswana; the University of Durban-Westville, South Africa; the Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa. For the present paper I am indebted to Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, Vernie February, Mogobe Ramose, Simon Simonse, Marleen Ramsey, and the participants in the inspiring conference in *African Renaissance and Ubuntu Philosophy* held in May 2001 at the University of Groningen where the first version of this paper was presented; and finally to the members of the department of the Philosophy of Man and Culture (Erasmus University Rotterdam), as well as to Renaat Devisch, Peter Crossman, and Koen Stroeken (Africa Research Centre, Louvain), for illuminating criticism of later versions.
- <sup>2</sup> The earliest publication on *ubuntu* known to me is: Samkange, S., & Samkange, T.M., 1980, *Hunhuism or ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe indigenous political philosophy*, Salisbury [Harare] : Graham. Further see: Bhengu, M.J., 1996, *Ubuntu: The essence of democracy*, Cape Town: Novalis; Khanyile, E., 1990, *Education, culture and the role of Ubuntu (non vidi)*; Khoza, R., 1994. *African humanism*. Ekhaya Promotions: Diepkloof Extension SA ; Louw, D.J., n.d. [1997] , 'Ubuntu: An African assessment of the religious order', <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Afri/AfriLouw.htm>; Makhudu, N., 1993, 'Cultivating a climate of co-operation through ubuntu', *Enterprise*, 68: 40-41; Mbigi, L., 1992, 'Unhu or Ubuntu: The basis for effective HR

- management', *Peoples Dynamics*, October 1992: 20-26; Mbigi, L., 1996, *Ubuntu: The African dream in management*, Randburg (S.A.): Knowledge Resources, second impression; Mbigi, L., & Maree, J., 1995, *Ubuntu: The spirit of African transformation management*, Randburg: Knowledge Resources; Prinsloo, E.D., 1996, 'The Ubuntu style of Participatory Management', in: Malherbe, J.G., ed., *Decolonizing the mind: Proceedings of the 2nd colloquium on African philosophy held at the University of South Africa*, October 1995, Pretoria: Unisa, pp. 112-122; Prinsloo, E.D., 1998, 'Ubuntu culture and participatory management', in: Coetzee, P.H., & Roux, A.P.J., 1998, eds., *The African philosophy reader*, London: Routledge, pp. 41-50; Ramose, M.B., 1999, *African philosophy through ubuntu*, Avondele (Harare): Mond.
- <sup>3</sup> Bleek W., 1851, *De nominum generibus linguarum Africae australis, copticae, semiticarum aliarumque sexualium*, Ph.D. thesis, Bonn University
- <sup>4</sup> There are indications that the root *-ntu*, and its semantic field, are not really unique to Bantu languages. In Proto-Austronesian i.e. Malayo-Polynesian languages an essentially similar root, *taw*, appears with the same meaning 'human'; cf. Adelaar, S., 1994, 'Asian roots of the Malagasy: A linguistic perspective', paper presented at the congress on Malagasy cultural identity from the Asian perspective, Leiden, 28-29 March 1994, conference meanwhile published by the International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden. It is quite possible that we have another cognate, in the Indo-European domain, in the root *\*endh*, 'low' 'turned towards the earth', which has been argued to underlie ancient Greek *anthropos* and *Athena*; and which incidentally we may also suspect under the Germanic words *under* / *unter* / *onder*. Cf Ode, A.W.M., 1927, 'Reflexe von "Tabu" und "Noa" in den Indogermanischen Sprachen', *Mededelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen*, afd. Letterkunde, 63, A, 3: 73-100.
- <sup>5</sup> This is the situation among the Nkoya and throughout South Central Africa; cf. Marks, S., 1976, *Large mammals and a brave people*, Seattle/London: University of Washington Press.
- <sup>6</sup> van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 2001, 'Witchcraft in modern Africa as virtualised boundary conditions of the kinship order', in : Bond, G.C., & Ciekawy, D.M., eds., *Witchcraft dialogues: Anthropological and philosophical exchanges*, pp. 212-263, also at: [http://come.to/african\\_religion](http://come.to/african_religion); van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1981, *Religious Change in Zambia: Exploratory studies*, London/Boston: Kegan Paul International, esp. ch. 4.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. Branford, J., with W. Branford, 1991, *A dictionary of South African English*, 4th edition, Cape Town: Oxford University Press, reprint of 1st ed. of 1978, p. 208, s.v. *munt(u)*: 'An offensive mode of reference to a black person.'
- <sup>8</sup> Goethe: 'identifications not by blood but by choice'.
- <sup>9</sup> Much to my surprise. In line with the general public view of domestic history held in The Netherlands in the second half of the twentieth century CE, I took it that the ancestors of the South African Afrikaanders or Boers parted company with their European brothers in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, then in the nineteenth century changed their language into a version of Dutch that is no longer commonly understood in The Netherlands, and finally in the twentieth century committed crimes against humanity that for the two reasons mentioned no longer deserve to be associated with the ethnonym Dutch, and that the Dutch of The Netherlands could not be held collectively responsible for. But this was a slightly naïve and anachronistic view. It did not do justice to the factual, and many-sided, linguistic, intellectual, religious, political and demographic continuity between Afrikaanders and European Dutch until the middle of the twentieth century — a continuity that was in line with racialist attitudes prevailing in The Netherlands' Asian and South American colonies right until their end. This

embarrassing continuity only came to be denied as far as the past is concerned, and to be felt as a source of embarrassment and therefore to be effectively terminated in the present, as a result of critical reflection on the atrocities of apartheid, from the 1960s onwards, when I was only a secondary school and university student.

<sup>10</sup> van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1991, 'Becoming a sangoma: Religious anthropological field-work in Francistown, Botswana', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 21, 4: 309-344; van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1998, 'Sangoma in Nederland: Over integriteit in interculturele bemiddeling', in: Elias, M., & Reis, R., eds., *Getuigen ondanks zichzelf: Voor Jan-Matthijs Schoffeleers bij zijn zeventigste verjaardag*, Maastricht: Shaker, pp. 1-29; English version: 'Sangoma in the Netherlands: On integrity in intercultural mediation', both texts at: [http://come.to/african\\_religion](http://come.to/african_religion), and greatly revised version forthcoming in my book *Intercultural encounters*. The same problematic is also discussed within the wider framework of intercultural philosophy in: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1999, '*Culturen bestaan niet*': *Het onderzoek van intercultureelheid als een openbreken van vanzelfsprekendheden*, inaugural lecture, chair of intercultural philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam: Rotterdamse Filosofische Studies; English version 'Cultures do not exist': Exploding self-evidences in the investigation of interculturelity', paper read at the 'Seminar on culture and globalisation', Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 21st April, 1999; revised version in *Quest — Philosophical Discussions: An International African Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. XIII, no. 1-2, 1999; also at [http://come.to/van\\_binsbergen](http://come.to/van_binsbergen).

<sup>11</sup> Ramose, *o.c.*

<sup>12</sup> Amselle, J.-L., 2001, *Branchements: Anthropologie de l'universalité des cultures*, Paris: Flammarion, p. 109; Obenga, T., 2001, *Le sens de la lutte contre l'afrocentrisme eurocentrisme*, Gif-sur-Yvette (Cedex)/ Paris: Khepera/ L'Harmattan, p. 23; van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 2000, 'Le point de vue de Wim van Binsbergen', in: 'Autour d'un livre. Afrocentrisme, de Stephen Howe, et Afrocentrismes: L'histoire des Africains entre Égypte et Amérique, de Jean-Pierre chrétien [ sic ], François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar et Claude-Hélène Perrot (dir.), par Mohamed Mbodj, Jean Copans et Wim van Binsbergen', *Politique africaine*, no. 79, octobre 2000, pp. 175-180; W.M.J. van Binsbergen, 2000, 'Dans le troisième millénaire avec Black Athena?', in: Fauvelle-Aymar, F.-X., Chrétien, J.-P., & Perrot, C.-H., *Afrocentrismes: L'histoire des Africains entre Égypte et Amérique*, Paris: Karthala, pp. 127-150; my pieces as cited in this note also at: [http://come.to/black\\_athena](http://come.to/black_athena).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Mbeki, G., 1999, 'Towards the African renaissance', in: Hadland, A., & J. Rantao, *The life and times of Thabo Mbeki*, Rivonia (S.A.): Zebra/Southern/New Holland Struik; Mr Mbeki here allowed himself to be inspired by Afrocentrist ideas first formulated by Diop in one of his first published articles: Diop C. A., 1948, 'Quand pourra-t-on parler d'une Renaissance africaine?', *Le Musée vivant*, n° 36-37, novembre, pp. 57-65; translated in: Diop, C.A., 1996, *Towards the African renaissance: Essays in African culture & development 1946-1960*, tr. from the French by E.P. Modum, London: Karnak House, pp. 33-45.

<sup>14</sup> This again is not a quotation but my own vicarious attempt at making the implied argument explicit.

<sup>15</sup> Froidefond, C., 1971, *Le mirage égyptien dans la littérature grecque d'Homère à Aristote*, Paris: Ophrys.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Bloch, E., 1973, *Geist der Utopie*, Frankfurt a/M.: Suhrkamp, first published 1923; Buber, M., 1950, *Pfade in Utopia*, Heidelberg: Schneider; Dahrendorf, R., 1957, *Soziale Klassen und Klassenkonflikt in der modernen Gesellschaft*, Stuttgart: Enke, ch. entitled 'Pfade aus Utopia';

Engels, F., 1947, *Herr Eugen Dühring's revolution in science*, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, first published 1888; Hommes, U., 1973-1974, 'Utopie,' in: Krings, H., Baumgartner, H.M., & Wild, C., eds., *Handbuch Philosophischer Grundbegriffe*, Studienausgabe, München: Kösel, vol. vi, pp. 1571ff ; Mall, R.A., 1995, *Philosophie im Vergleich der Kulturen: Interkulturelle Philosophie, eine neue Orientierung*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft (where the 'localisingly placeless' — *orthaft ortlos*, p. 78 — plays a central part); Mannheim, K., 1936, *Ideology and utopia: An introduction to the sociology of knowledge*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, originally published as *Ideologie und Utopie*, Bonn: Cohen, 1929.

- <sup>17</sup> Prophetism scarcely enters into philosophical discourse. In epistemology it may be occasionally — e.g. in medieval Jewish philosophy (cf. Rudavsky, T., 2000, 'The Jewish contribution to medieval philosophical theology', in: Quinn, P.L., & Taliaferro, C., eds., *A companion to the philosophy of religion*, Malden / Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 95-102, first published 1997, p. 101) — invoked as a boundary condition for the knowledge and agency attributed to a supreme being. However, cf. Derrida, J., & Vattimo, G., 1996, *La religion*, Paris/ Rome: Seuil/ Laterza, where Derrida in his contribution does stress messianic and prophetic traits.
- <sup>18</sup> By its ancient Greek etymology, prophetism consists in '[officially] speaking on behalf of'. It embodies the herald's role to which, throughout the Ancient World, special sacredness and sanctuary attached; cf. Kristensen, W.B., 1966, 'De goddelijke heraut en het woord van God', in his *Godsdiensten in de oude wereld*, Utrecht/Antwerpen: Spectrum, 2nd ed, pp. 127-148, the first edition was entitled *Verzamelde bijdragen tot kennis van de antieke godsdiensten*. It is the very act of such representation and mediation that is almost universally recognised as sacred, even regardless of the divine, royal or hieratic nature of party on whose behalf is being spoken. Intercultural philosophers and ethnographers should pay the greatest attention to this cultural formatting of what is, after all, also their own role. Intercultural philosophy and ethnography are, at best, prophetic commitments.
- <sup>19</sup> For such an approach to prophetism, developed in relation to twentieth century prophets (Mupumani, Tomo Nyirenda alias Mwana Lesa, Alice Lenshina) proclaiming radical transformations of historic African religion in Zambia, cf. my *Religious Change, o.c.* The underlying philosophical theory would be Marxist, as throughout that book; also cf. Torrance, J., 1995, *Karl Marx's theory of ideas*, Cambridge / Paris: Cambridge University Press / Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme. In recent philosophy, similar ideas were taken up by Foucault's archaeological method, which seeks to identify, as part of a philosophically underpinned history of ideas not without Marxist inspiration, the internal relations between discursive elements without recourse to actors' explicit intentions and representations. Foucault, M., 1969, *L'Archéologie du savoir*, Paris: Gallimard, Engl. version *The archaeology of knowledge*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, 1972. Ironically, Foucault's later 'genealogical' attempt to accommodate *change* in this perspective, made him stress contingency at the expense of the (Marxist- and structuralist-inspired) structural, systematic and hence repetitive correspondences between society and person on which my view of prophethood depends. Part of the irony is that here he shows himself a die-hard historian, member of a discipline that has always defended, as its hallmark, as 'properly historical', an emphasis on contingency in the face of historicising social scientists like myself; another part is that even such a disciplinary sense of *esprit de corps* has not prevented Foucault from being widely regarded as a great and innovative mind but a bad

historian. Also cf. chs 1 and 2 of *Religious change*, for a further elaboration of this problematic in the context of spirit possession and mediumship, and of the possibility of a macro-sociological theory of religious change.

- <sup>20</sup> Cf. Kaunda, K., 1966, *A Humanist in Africa*, London: Longman; Kaunda, K.D., n.d. [1971] , *Humanism in Zambia: And a guide to its implementation*, Lusaka: Government Printer; Dillon-Malone, C., 1989, *Zambian humanism, religion and social morality*, Mission Press, Ndola, Zambia; Van Binsbergen, W.M.J., & M.E. Hall, 1972, 'A seminar on Zambian humanism and modernization', Department of Sociology/ Department of Extramural Studies, University of Zambia, mimeo, 18 pp.
- <sup>21</sup> Caplan, G. L., 1970, *The elites of Barotseland, 1878-1969*, London: Hurst.
- <sup>22</sup> Incidentally, the inclusive principle identified is part of the Southern African normative system at the village level, where for instance every adult has the obligation, but also the right, to guard over the interests of all children, regardless of the specific genealogical ties between adult and child.
- <sup>23</sup> Cf. Mbeki, G., 1999, 'Towards the African renaissance', in: Hadland, A., & J. Rantao, *The life and times of Thabo Mbeki*, Rivonia (South Africa): Zebra/ Southern/ New Holland Struik; Mr Mbeki here allowed himself to be inspired by Afrocentrist ideas first formulated by Diop in one of his first published articles: Diop, C.A., 1948, 'Quand pourra-t-on parler d'une Renaissance africaine ?', *Le Musée vivant*, no. 36-37, novembre, pp. 57-65, translated in: Diop, C.A., 1996, *Towards the African renaissance: Essays in African culture & development 1946-1960*, tr. from the French by E.P. Modum, London: Karnak House, pp. 33-45; the latter book has circulated widely in South Africa.
- <sup>24</sup> Seminal Afrocentrist writings include (also cf. previous note): Diop, C.A., 1955, *Nations nègres et culture: de l'antiquité nègre-égyptienne aux problèmes culturels de l'Afrique noire d'aujourd'hui*, Paris: Présence Africaine, 2nd ed., first published 1954; Diop C.A., 1959, *L'unité culturelle de l'Afrique noire: Domaines du patriarcat et du matriarcat dans l'Antiquité classique*, Paris: Présence africaine; Asante M.K., 1982, 'Afrocentricity and Culture', in : Asante, M.K., & Asante, K.W., eds, *African culture*, Trenton, Africa World Press, pp. 3ff; Asante M.K., 1987, *The Afrocentric idea*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press; Obenga, T., 1990, *La philosophie africaine de la période pharaonique: 2780-330 avant notre ère*, Paris: L'Harmattan; Obenga, T., 1995, *Cheikh Anta Diop, Volney et le Sphinx: Contribution de Cheikh Anta Diop à l'historiographie mondiale*, Paris: Présence africaine. For well-documented but largely dismissive critical assessments, cf. Fauvelle, F.-X., 1996, *L'Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, Paris: Karthala; Fauvelle-Aymar, F.-X., Chrétien, J.-P., & Perrot, C.-H., 2000, eds., *Afrocentrismes: L'histoire des Africains entre Égypte et Amérique*, Paris: Karthala, English tr. in preparation; Howe, S., 1999, *Afrocentrism: Mythical pasts and imagined homes*, London/ New York: Verso, first published 1998. Also cf. note 12 above.
- <sup>25</sup> Austin, J.L., 1962, *How to do things with words*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. For an up-to-date review of this perspective, cf. Avramides, A., 1999, 'Intention and convention', in: Hale, B., & Wright, C., 1999, eds., *A companion to the philosophy of language*, Oxford: Blackwell, first published 1997, pp. 60-86, and references cited there.
- <sup>26</sup> Peter Crossmann, in a personal comment, wondered whether such concepts as Austin derived from ordinary English-language use, reflecting the very specific syntactics of expressing modability in that language, could appropriately be applied to languages way out of the Indo-European language family, like those of the Bantu language family, whose syntax is very different. The question implies a specific application of the Whorf-Sapir thesis, according to

which it is language that structures our image of reality. However, in this specific case the problem does not arise, since both *Zambian humanism* and *ubuntu* philosophy are originally expressed in the English language.

<sup>27</sup> I happen to have other capacities, e.g. as North Atlantic university professor, philosopher, citizen, in which the unconditional identification with *ubuntu* and *Zambian humanism* is more problematic.

<sup>28</sup> Extensively on this point: my '*Culturen bestaan niet*' / '*Cultures do not exist, o.c.*'

<sup>29</sup> Like the case I described for the urban *sangomas*: representing a traditionalising ritual idiom in an urban context which not only is thoroughly globalised and commodified, but whose modern and globalised features also penetrate the very texture of the *sangomas*' everyday life and ritual practice; cf. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., in the press, 'We are in this for the money': Commodification and the *sangoma* cult of Southern Africa', in: Geschiere, P.L., & van Binsbergen, W.M.J., *Commodification: Things, agency, and identities (Social Life of Things revisited)*, Durham: Duke University Press; this paper was read at the conference 'Commodification and identities', Amsterdam: WOTRO programme 'Globalization and the construction of communal identities', 12 June, 1999; also at [http://come.to/african\\_religion](http://come.to/african_religion).

<sup>30</sup> I have expressed this view of Southern African 'traditional' culture as going underground in a number of articles, e.g. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1993, 'Making sense of urban space in Francistown, Botswana', in: P.J.M. Nas, ed., *Urban symbolism*, Leiden: Brill, *Studies in Human Societies*, volume 8, pp. 184-228; van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1993, 'African Independent churches and the state in Botswana', in M. Bax & A. de Koster, eds., *Power and prayer: Essays on Religion and politics*, CentREPOL-VU Studies 2, Amsterdam: VU University Press, pp. 24-56. The latter article also at: [http://come.to/african\\_religion](http://come.to/african_religion).

<sup>31</sup> van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1997, 'Verzoening: Perspectieven vanuit de culturele antropologie van Afrika', *In de marge: Tijdschrift voor levensbeschouwing en wetenschap*, theme issue on 'verzoening' (reconciliation), 6, 4: 28-39; English version: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1999, 'Reconciliation: A major African social technology of shared and recognised humanity (*ubuntu*)', paper read at the 'Seminar on culture and globalisation', Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 21st April, 1999, forthcoming in my *Intercultural encounters*; also [http://come.to/african\\_religion](http://come.to/african_religion).

<sup>32</sup> The literature on human rights is vast. E.g. cf.: Renteln, A.D., 1985, 'The unanswered challenge of relativism and the consequences for human rights', in: *Human Rights Quarterly* 7, iv: 514-540; Scholze, W., 1992, 'Human rights between universalism and relativism', *Quest — Philosophical Discussions: An International African Journal of Philosophy*, 6, 1; Meron, T., 1991, *Human rights and humanitarian norms as customary law*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, paperback reprint of the first 1989 edition; and from a more general philosophical perspective: Monroe, K.R., 1996, *The heart of altruism: Perceptions of a common humanity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>33</sup> Lyotard, J.-F., 1979, *La condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir*, Paris: Editions de Minuit.

<sup>34</sup> Foucault, M., 1963, *Naissance de la clinique: Une archéologie du regard médical*, Presses Universitaires de France, trans. A. Sheridan: *The birth of the clinic: An archaeology of medical perception* (New York: Vintage, 1973); Foucault, M., 1975, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*, Gallimard: Paris, Engl. transl.: *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*, London, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987. Also cf. *L'Archéologie du savoir, o.c.*

<sup>35</sup> There is an alternative, however, that has become more and more articulate in the most recent



years. In the final quarter of the twentieth century, as a result of a number of factors (the international oil crisis, Khomeiny's Iranian revolution, the massive intercontinental migration of Muslims to the North Atlantic, and the demise of international communism), Islam has emerged on a global scale as the main viable alternative, the main challenge, of the North Atlantic claim to cultural, economic, military, technological and spiritual hegemony. The Palestinian conflict, the Gulf War, the attacks on New York and Washington of 11th September 2001, the subsequent Afghanistan war, are among the manifestations of this challenge and counter-challenge. This is the background of the continued rapid expansion of Islam in Africa today — even though Africans have suffered under Muslim and Christian hands alike in previous centuries.

<sup>36</sup> van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 2002, 'ICT vanuit intercultureel perspectief: Een Afrikaanse verkenning', in: de Mul, J., 2002, ed., *Filosofie in cyberspace: Reflecties op de informatie- en communicatietechnologie*, Kampen: Klement, pp. 88-115; English version forthcoming in my: *Intercultural encounters*; also on: [http://come.to/van\\_binsbergen](http://come.to/van_binsbergen).

<sup>37</sup> Hobsbawn, E., & Ranger, T.O., 1983, eds, *The invention of tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>38</sup> Given the great geographical mobility of most African social forms, the location of the nineteenth-century ancestral villages is unlikely to coincide narrowly with the villages, if any, of their descendants in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

<sup>39</sup> Ranger, T.O., 1983, 'The invention of tradition in colonial Africa', in: *The invention of tradition, o.c.*

<sup>40</sup> van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1998, 'Globalization and virtuality: Analytical problems posed by the contemporary transformation of African societies', in: Meyer, B., & Geschiere, P., eds., *Globalization and identity: Dialectics of flow and closure*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 273-303, also at: [http://come.to/van\\_binsbergen](http://come.to/van_binsbergen); my 'Witchcraft in modern Africa', *o.c.*

<sup>41</sup> Ranger, T.O., 1982, 'Race and tribe in Southern Africa: European ideas and African acceptance', in: Ross, R., ed., *Race and colonialism*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, pp. 121-42; my 'Culturen bestaan niet', *o.c.*

<sup>42</sup> My critique of *ubuntu* amounts to the allegation that academic codifications of local knowledge after a globally circulating format tend to streamline, linealise and rationalise that knowledge almost beyond recognition. The point can be generalised to include the entire industry, so fashionable since the 1980s and so nicely financed by donor organisations and the UNESCO, that concentrates on capturing 'indigenous knowledge systems' and brings the product of such capture into global circulation, allegedly in order to save such knowledge from extinction but in fact producing the opposite result.

<sup>43</sup> In ways exemplarily studied in the works of such anthropologists of religion as Victor Turner, Jim Fernandez, Richard Werbner, and Renaat Devisch; cf. Turner, V.W., 1967, *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual*, Ithaca (N.Y.): Cornell University Press; Turner, V.W., 1968, *The drums of affliction: A study of religious processes among the Ndembu of Zambia*, London: Oxford University Press; Turner, V.W., 1969, *The ritual process*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Fernandez, J.W., 1982, *Bwiti: An ethnography of the religious imagination in Africa*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Werbner, R.P., 1989, *Ritual passage sacred journey: The process and organization of religious movement*, Washington/ Manchester: Smithsonian Institution Press/ Manchester University Press; Devisch, R., 1984, *Se recréer femme: Manipulation sémantique d'une situation d'infécondité chez les Yaka*, Berlin: Reimer; Devisch, R., 1993, *Weaving the threads of life: The Khita gyn-eco-logical healing cult among*

*the Yaka*, Chicago/ London: Chicago University Press.

- <sup>44</sup> Pike, K.L., 1954, *Language in relation to a unified theory of the structure of human behavior*, vol. 1. Glendale: Summer Institute of Linguistics; cf. Headland, T.N., Pike, K.L., & Harris, M., 1990, eds., *Emics and etics: The insider/outsider debate*, Frontiers of Anthropology no. 7, Newbury Park/ London/ New Delhi: Sage, with an interesting short contribution by one of today's most famous philosophers: Quine, W.V., 1990, 'The phoneme's long shadow', in: Headland c.s., o.c., pp. 164-167. Also cf. the extensive discussion of this pair of concepts in my 'Culturen bestaan niet', o.c.
- <sup>45</sup> Mudimbe, V.Y., 1997, *Tales of faith: Religion as political performance in Central Africa: Jordan Lectures 1993*, London & Atlantic Highlands: Athlone Press; cf. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 2001, 'An incomprehensible miracle': Central African clerical intellectualism and African historic religion: A close reading of Valentin Mudimbe's *Tales of Faith*, paper, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1st February 2001, also on: [http://come.to/african\\_religion](http://come.to/african_religion).
- <sup>46</sup> I use this word as an alternative to the worn-out term 'traditional' (which yet occasionally filters into my prose), and more or less as a synonym of 'pre-colonial', 'autochthonous', 'pre-globalisation', 'pre-world-religion'. What is *not* meant by 'historic' here is: 'the *emic* representation of local history'.
- <sup>47</sup> Cf. Eboussi Boulaga, F., 1968, 'Le Bantou Problematique,' *Presence Africaine*, no. 66; Eboussi Boulaga, F., 1977, *La crise du muntu: Authenticité africaine et philosophie*, Paris: Présence africaine; Jahn, J., 1958, *Muntu: Umrisse der neoafrikanische Kultur*, Düsseldorf/ Köln: Diederichs; Kagame, A., 1955, *La philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l'Etre*, Bruxelles: Académie royale des Sciences coloniales; Tempels, P., 1955, *Bantoe-filosofie*, Antwerpen: De Sikkel.
- <sup>48</sup> Needless to add that this international boycott was otherwise highly beneficial in the sense of conducive to the end of minority rule.
- <sup>49</sup> For a critique of this notion, cf. my 'Culturen bestaan niet', o.c., and references cited there.
- <sup>50</sup> On the role which some African philosophers attribute to the sage (as distinct from the religious and therapeutic specialist) in African philosophy, cf. Oruka, H.O., 1990, ed., *Sage philosophy: Indigenous thinkers and modern debate on African philosophy*, Leiden: Brill; for a critical note, cf. my 'Culturen bestaan niet'.
- <sup>51</sup> Rasing, T., 1995, *Passing on the rites of passage: Girls' initiation rites in the context of an urban Roman Catholic community on the Zambian Copperbelt*, Leiden/ London: African Studies Centre/ Avebury; Rasing, T., 2001, *The bush burned the stones remain: Women's initiation and globalization in Zambia*, Ph.D. thesis, Erasmus University Rotterdam; Hamburg/ Muenster: LIT Verlag; my 'Virtuality as a key concept', o.c.; van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1987, 'De schaduw waar je niet overheen mag stappen: Een westers onderzoeker op het Nkoja meisjesfeest', in: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., & Doornbos, M.R., eds., *Afrika in spiegelbeeld*, Haarlem: In de Knipscheer, pp. 139-182, English version at [http://come.to/african\\_religion](http://come.to/african_religion), and forthcoming in my *Intercultural encounters*.
- <sup>52</sup> This again is not a quotation but my own vicarious attempt at making the implied argument explicit.
- <sup>53</sup> As previous note.
- <sup>54</sup> Cf. Habermas, J., 1970, 'Gadamers *Wahrheit und Methode*', in: Habermas, J., *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, pp. 251-290.



## **UBUNTU AS A MANAGEMENT CONCEPT**

**Luchien Karsten**  
**Honorine Illa**

*“Chacun appelle barbarie ce qui n’est pas de son usage;  
comme de vrai, il semble que nous n’avons autre mine de  
la vérité et de la raison que l’exemple et idée des opinions  
et usances du pays où nous sommes”.*  
*Montaigne, Essais, Ch. XXXI. Tome I.*

### *Introduction*

It is often claimed that developing countries can speed up their process of development by promoting the transfer of knowledge from developed countries. Defenders of this claim presuppose that if developing countries adapt themselves to the transferred knowledge, their economies will improve. However, Shahidullah (1999) underlines that this radical engagement of adoption of knowledge, as he calls it, is not being supported by everyone. Some are opposed to this engagement and prefer to defend either a radical disengagement or a limited version. The advocates of the radical disengagement assert that developing countries should not adopt western knowledge because it is embedded in cultural and intellectual traditions of the west and, therefore, are not compatible with the needs of the developing countries. Those who share a more moderate version believe that western knowledge is vital, but that the knowledge, which is to be adopted, should be in line with the development priorities, and social and cultural preferences of developing countries. This means that the knowledge to be transferred should be disengaged from the value orientations of the western industrial societies. Those defending this moderate perspective propagate an inward looking, self-reliant strategy.

The radical engagement perspective presupposes that adoption can only be realised if a proper infrastructure with social institutions and cultural mentalities has been put in place, which favours progress. Professionalism should be enhanced and policies promoted leading to a critical mass of people in developing countries, favouring an adequate knowledge transfer. The problem with this view, however, is the infrastructure, which might be a necessary condition but not a sufficient one to understand processes of knowledge transfer. The neo-institutionalists, DiMaggio & Powell (1983)<sup>1</sup> have developed a model that tried to resolve the second criterion.

They have differentiated three types of transfer mechanisms – coercive, mimetic and normative – through which a management concept can be diffused. A transfer mechanism is labelled coercive whenever the process of the transfer is being imposed rather than eagerly pursued whereas a transfer mechanism is labelled mimetic when imitation is at work and reflects a spontaneous decision locally to replicate appropriate foreign models. The third type of transfer takes place in an indirect way through the homogenisation of norms, values and rules. A normative transfer mechanism is neither voluntarily chosen nor forced in any direct way, but an unavoidable consequence of certain commitments such as, the establishment of international bodies for example, the World Bank, IMF, GATT, WHO, and the creation of professional associations.

Although it is difficult to completely separate the three sorts of mechanisms, as they are ideal types we, nevertheless, believe that within the radical engagement perspective in the domain of management knowledge, a switch from the second to the third mechanism can be noticed. It is notable that African managers who are properly trained embrace management models and approaches coming from elsewhere based on the fact that they share common norms and values about their professional identity. DiMaggio & Powell (1983), however, have neglected one important issue concerning the processes through which management concepts are absorbed in organisations. Managers not only share particular management concepts being part of the knowledge that belongs to their professionalism, but they have to reinterpret and translate these concepts into their own practice. There are only a few studies, which so far have focused on how concepts are translated (Czarniawska & Sevon 1996). This translation issue has been neglected for a very long time. Since the proliferation of management ideas in the USA during the 1980s and their apparent increasing transience as ‘fads’, research has endeavoured to examine the process of knowledge diffusion through knowledge management and organisational learning. Particular emphasis has been placed on the rhetorical, linguistic or dramaturgical performances and packing by diffusion agents (consultants and gurus) (Abrahamson 1991, Huczynski 1993, Clark 1995, Kieser 1997, Grint & Case 1998).

While the focus on the promotion and supply of ideas has provided an important contribution to understanding the diffusion of concepts, the recipients or audience are often neglected. Studying the culture or the norms and values of professional associations will be necessary but it is not sufficient enough to understand how management concepts are being translated. We will have to recognise that there is a sharp distinction between management concepts and their implementation as practices. There is still a lack of studies on the ways in which management

concepts are reconstituted through social groups in organisations that perpetrate, use and apply them for various purposes. Management concepts are not single, uniform or relatively unchanging entities, but they are full of ambiguity (Abrahamson 1996). African managers will have to speak another language to turn management concepts into actionable knowledge that will be useful for their practice compared to Japanese or American managers. In this article, we will describe the main characteristics of management concepts and underline the processes to establish a proper translation.

*Ubuntu* has been embraced as an African value, which constitutes a specific societal background. *Ubuntu* is also embraced as a concept, which can improve social relations within organisations. *Ubuntu* as a management concept is nowadays propagated as comparable to similar concepts that have been developed in the Western world. It might be that with *Ubuntu*, the African business community is getting beyond the situation that coercive and mimetic mechanisms dominate when applying modern management approaches. Mbigi (1997, 38) even believes that “black managers should overcome their dependency on white management, thinking of developing their own afrocentric management ideas (i.e. concepts according to our view) and management practices”. We agree that the promulgation of indigenous African management concepts is required in order to better understand African business practices and we believe that with the promotion of those concepts, the transfer of knowledge will develop into a two-way system of *partners* in order to enhance at least one partner’s knowledge and expertise, and strengthen each partner’s competitive position. *Ubuntu* as a management concept can play a crucial role for the improvement of knowledge transfer. To illustrate our point of view, we will start with a general description of the characteristics of management concepts. Next, we will position African management in its own context and position, *Ubuntu* as a management concept. In the last part of our contribution, we will raise the question to what extent the South and North can both learn from the development of African management concepts and how dialogues amongst partners can be improved.

### *Management concepts in practice*

In 1990, the former McKinsey consultant R. Pascale published a book *Managing on the Edge* in which he expressed his surprise about the tremendous popularity of certain management concepts. Reviewing the prevailing management literature he noticed the ebbs and flows of many business fads. The sudden rise and fall of so many conflicting fads is alarming to his view. He had to admit however that some

of the management concepts that became fads such as, Total Quality Management, stimulated serious consideration and have been adopted as an enduring way of doing business. K. Grint (1992) noticed in *Fuzzy Management* that the situation described by Pascale had been aggravated in the beginning of the 1990s. It turned out that for the business community, the issue was not whether management concepts are logical in the sense that they are scientifically substantiated but whether they secure business results that are currently accounted legitimate. Even if their academic value cannot be proven, management concepts should at least result in an increase in productivity, efficiency or profitability.

Apparently, management concepts seem to lack an in-depth grasp of their underlying foundation. However, it does not prevent new management concepts to be launched in the knowledge market where managers look for new ideas. We, therefore, have to raise the question, what makes management concepts so popular. Management concepts are mental creations, “constituents of thought” (Fodor 1998, 23), about specific processes in organisations. As mental creations, they express new ideas, which can support managers to do their jobs. Where these ideas exactly come from and how they turn into knowledge are complex issues. The Harvard Business School professors, Nohria & Eccles (1998, 279), concluded the following, “if asked, most people would tell an interesting story about the variety of sources that have contributed to the ways they act and think as managers. Indeed, management knowledge comes from everywhere: it comes from a manager’s own experience, from books and articles on a variety of topics [...] and increasingly from consulting firms”. The most remarkable fact, however, is that the popularity of management concepts has much more to do with the quality of the *source* providing the concept than with its truth. “Managers are interested in ideas which are established by the reputation of a particular country (e.g. Japan), company (e.g. General Electric), manager (e.g. Jack Welch), consulting firm (e.g. McKinsey), educational institution (e.g. Stanford), or professor/consultant (e.g. Peter Drucker). That is the source of a particular concept” (Nohria & Eccles 1998, 289).

Considering the former, we can identify four characteristics of management concepts (Karsten & Van Veen 1998):

- (a) Management concepts usually have a striking label such as, Total Quality Management (TQM), Business Process Reengineering (BPR), Core Competency, or Knowledge Management. Whenever possible these concepts are reduced into acronyms e.g. TQM or BPR, to make them convincing and persuasive within the language community of management, and help create specific networks of managers sharing the same discourse.

- (b) Management concepts describe specific management issues in general terms, which cause an increase of costs or a loss of customers. Managers are then faced with an irresolute but pressing problem that calls for a new meaning and thus, they are compelled to develop a more probable course of action to improve the situation. Concepts can frame a particular organisational problem and make it recognisable for the managers involved. For example, BPR will be seen, as a useful analysis because it allows managers to identify the actual company structure, which has to be redesigned.
- (c) Management concepts offer a general solution to identified problems. They do not offer rules, which prescribe relatively specific actions, but principles or guidelines that bring about mutual orientations between actors and only prescribe highly unspecific actions. Principles constitute a standard of conduct and propel action in a certain direction. They evolve from the values and practices of a specific community of actors where the concept has been developed. Guidelines do not have the degree of 'settledness', which principles possess. They are often issued as a provisional measure until more is known about the practical usefulness of a concept. For example, BPR will justify its interventionist principles by stating that companies with obsolete structures will become more efficient once the structure has been redesigned and modern information and communication technology has been introduced. In order to be persuaded by the quality of certain principles, another characteristic comes into play.
- (d) The proposed solution will be promoted by referring to success stories about specific well-known firms, which already have implemented the concept. General Electric, IBM, Shell and Toyota are usually portrayed as convincing examples of the success of concepts. The examples are the narratives, which articulate the knowledge employed in situations that have created new 'best practices'. The advantage of the narration is that it facilitates social interaction. Readers are invited to share with each other the different meanings that can be given to the examples (Tsoukas, 1998). The examples illustrate how at the right time (*kairos*), these organisations offer the opportunity to introduce a new concept (Miller, 1992).

These four characteristics make a management concept recognisable and provide a certain kind of knowledge about a specific management practice. The fact remains, however, that the knowledge contained in a management concept does not provide rules according to which a successful implementation can logically be deduced.



Although the above characteristic b) and c) suggest that there are rules involved as impersonal, generic or temporal formulae to identify a problem and solve it, these are usually not made explicit.

Managers have to use their own judgement to derive what the relevant implications are for them and how they can apply these concepts to their own specific business context. In other words, concepts have to be translated into the local company discourse. If we perceive companies as linguistically constituted communities, we look at the translation process not as rendering the general formulation of the concept into another local formulation, but as a learning to speak another language<sup>2</sup>.

### *Language*

In *Beyond the Hype*, Nohria & Eccles (1992, 9) have come to the conclusion that “in a nutshell, managers live in a rhetorical universe where language is constantly used not only to communicate but also to **persuade**, and even to **create**. The first step in taking a fresh perspective toward management is to take language, and hence rhetoric, seriously”. Managers have to foster action and then transfer the action to be meaningful for all participants within their organisation. With this statement, Nohria & Eccles (1992) have distanced themselves from the modernist view about language as the chief and neutral means by which we inform others about the results of our observations and thoughts. It was John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689, Book IV) who captured the Enlightenment view of language in which words are the carriers of truth and knowledge. Language in his view was able to represent the real, coupled as it was with the belief in reason and neutral observation. However, it was Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953, Part I, 43) who made the fundamental transition from the question of truth to the question of meaning and said that language does not gain its meaning from its reference but from its use in action (our emphasis). That use is embedded in the stream of human life. Since this ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy we have become aware of the fact that language is not simply a representational device to inform others. We constantly influence others through language when we want to share with others the content that words and sentences express. Grice (1957) calls this the intentional communication. It involves the transmission of non-natural meaning (as distinguished from natural meaning as in ‘smoke means fire’) through the process by which a speaker, by saying X, communicates a specific communicative intent. When this intent is recognised by the hearer it becomes *mutual knowledge* (Blum-Kulka 1997, 39).

In his book, *How to do Things with Words*, Austin (1975) argued that words actually do things. They not just describe or facilitate practice, but assume the status of practice. He calls these words performatives, because they perform deeds. For example, phrases like 'I apologise', 'I request', 'I order you to', have practical effects on and of themselves, and thus, constitute deeds.

Managers use this performative language to get things done. They do this through what Searle (1969) has called speechacts. Speechacts are composed of three elements:

- The locutionary act contains the propositional part of a sentence;
- The illocutionary act: the intention through which the sentence is pronounced. For example, what you do by uttering a promise; and
- The perlocutionary act: the way the hearer understands the meaning of the sentence.

While Austin describes functions of speechacts emphasising on the speaker's intention, Searle includes the hearer's interpretation (Robinson 1985, 116). Speakers string speech acts together to generate activity (discourse) in the form of conversations, stories, reports, meeting and the like. It is through discourses that managers can acquaint each other with the value of a concept for their specific business practice. Through discourses, which socially construct and certify particular meaningful versions of their organisational reality with others, they make sense of what they do (Watson 1994). In these "dialogical acts" (Taylor 1999, 35), they look for justification of the translation of a specific concept and its implementation in their own practice. During the discourse, knowledge about the concept will be transferred, interpreted and agreed. The outcome of such distinct discourses with their own mode of engagement is an actionable version of a management concept.

Habermas (1980) has refined the speechact theory by identifying three aspects, which compose speech acts: the illocutionary; the propositional; and the expressive. We have to understand what is intended with a linguistic expression and how a linguistic expression is used in a speech act. "The propositional component is constructed by means of a sentence with propositional content. The illocutionary component is an illocutionary act carried out with the aid of a performative sentence. The expressive component remains implicit in the normal form but can always be expanded into an expressive sentence" (Cooke 1994, 55). These three components are connected with three validity claims: (i) a claim to propositional

truth; (ii) a claim to normative rightness; and (iii) a claim to truthfulness. All three claims have to be taken into consideration when evaluating the usefulness of a management concept. With this pragmatic speech act theory, we can understand how managers use management concepts in order to co-ordinate and control organisations. The value of management concepts does not depend upon their factual content alone but upon their interpretative space for local contexts and their role for persuasion in local discourses. This persuasion, however, depends on the capability of the person (s) involved in speech acts and their interests. These interests reflect “the extant of social structures such that actors draw on discourses in different ways at different times in order to achieve their particular purposes” (Watson 1995, 817).

### *Habitus*

Searle has demonstrated that the meaning of speechacts depends on the specific context in which they take place. This context or background is structured and enabled by social conditions, not the least of which is the socially learned practice of speaking a language (Shusterman 1999, 19). The French philosopher P. Bourdieu has introduced the concept habitus to provide a model with which we can understand linguistic practices in their broader social space. Habitus is “a set of dispositions acquired through experience”. This ‘feel for the game’ is what enables an infinite number of moves to be made and adapted to the infinite number of possible situations which no rule can foresee no matter how complex (Bourdieu 1990, 9). Habitus explains how agents share a culture and its practices, within asymmetrical social positions and relations of domination (Bohman 1999, 133). Composed by a set of dispositions that inclines subjects to act in certain ways, the habitus does not determine the action causally. "These dispositions may be said to motivate certain actions and to the extent that these actions are regularised to compel a set of practices. But practices are not unilaterally determined by the habitus" (Butler 1999, 202).

Management concepts are not maps that prescribe how to move around in an organisation. Even if concepts contain rules or principles (formulae), they still have to be enacted. They do not apply themselves but have to be applied. Based on their habitus, managers fill the gap between any principle and guideline of a management concept and its enactment. The enactment is called knowing by Cook & Brown (1999, 387). Explicit knowledge is something we can possess, transfer and share in a common way, whereas knowing is a concrete dynamic human action reflecting the habitus of a manager. This action has primarily to be understood as

engaging in interaction i.e. discourses and afterwards checking how decisions (agreements)<sup>3</sup> have let to a better performance of the organisation. Over time, an organisation develops its own ways of knowing through its collective practices. A practice is the co-ordinated activities of groups and individuals within a group, carrying out their work as it is informed by a particular organisational context. This interaction is a bridging of knowledge and knowing. Knowing to use management concepts depends on the habitus of managers. Managers engage in communities of practice to provide meaning to concepts. Through these communities a joint understanding of what 'doing it this way' is negotiated and a shared meaning is constituted. Managers engage in a local company discourse to establish a common meaning of a particular concept. What they finally realise is not only 'talking the talk', but also 'walking the walk' (Ellerman 2000, 18). With the proper habitus at hand, management concepts will be enacted to enhance organisations to generate new practices and prevent any managers from just parroting the popular talk about management concepts. Cook & Brown (1999) are keen to promote the development of an epistemology of practice to better understand the processes of knowing. We believe that a pragmatic speech act theory is a key approach to develop such a new epistemology.

### *Life cycle of concepts*

So far we have looked at management concepts and the way the knowledge these concepts contain is used in local situations. What we have described is how a transfer of knowledge actually takes place at the micro level of organisations where managers engage in local discourse. This micro perspective can be extended to a macro level where managers, consultants, gurus, and the media are often engaged in the continuous transfer of knowledge, which is captured in management concepts. Management concepts reflect a life cycle pattern. Broad dissemination of a concept gives it credibility. On the other hand, however, once a concept starts spreading, it will either be interpreted differently by people or it will be used to accomplish different things. Concepts have to be flexible to accommodate different interpretations. As such, they are appropriated and reconfigured selectively by different groups with different interests, which can lead to confusion and over time cause a degeneration of a concept into a buzzword or fad. The ultimate result can be that the discredited concept has to be replaced with a new one. This will set the entire process in motion over again (Nohria & Eccles 1998). Sometimes managers simply switch to a new concept to indicate that they are familiar with the latest and most leading-edge management ideas. Consultants and gurus are familiar with this peculiar human behaviour of managers and try to be creative in launching new

management concepts to counter insecurity amongst managers. The transfer of knowledge they stimulate, however, is sometimes a redecoration of knowledge that has been around for some time. A new management concept turns out to be old wine in a politically correct new bottle. It can obtain a faddish character, suddenly rising in popularity and disappear. In this context, Pascale (1990, 20) came to the conclusion that the majority of “fads are largely an American phenomenon”. When we look at the management literature of today this still seems to be the case. The normative mechanism of the transfer of knowledge helps to spread a concept through professional associations, which share common norms about management.

There are, however, a few cases where a management concept became integrated into the comprehensive terminology of the management language. This, for example, was the case with concepts like productivity, culture and quality, which promoted a strong commitment to managerial excellence. These issues initially were introduced as concepts, but have become an integral part of the common management language.

### *Management concepts in practice*

Management practices clearly vary considerably between firms, industries and countries. Various studies of management in Africa have stressed the relevance of context. Blunt & Jones (1992, 1) emphasised in their book, *Managing Organisations in Africa*, that “whereas African organisations may find they can apply Western management concepts and practices to their technical core with few major modifications, these imported ideas and practices are generally found to be inadequate and/or inappropriate for the organisation’s relationships with their environments”. The discipline of management is full of concepts, which are firmly rooted in western social and cultural thought. Let us illustrate this with an example. Even the concept of ‘quality’, which was developed into an integral approach within Japanese firms, only became widespread once it had obtained an American translation and was reduced to a middle management project. Japanese quality control circles (QCC) were redefined into quality circles. Control itself had to stay in the hands of middle management and should not be given to teams of employees (Locke 1996, 189-190). Therefore, management concepts, which are attempted in other geographic areas, can contain potential barriers to successful implementation due to the cultural differences and contrasts.

This conclusion is as much valid for the private sector as for the public sector. Dia M. (1996) indicates that “the institutional crisis in Africa cannot be resolved by

relying exclusively either on purely traditional institutions or on transplanted institutions operated by expatriate technical assistants and specialist”. The solution is to encourage mergers between adapted formal institutions and renovated informal indigenous institutions. “In Africa, mutual legitimation, reconciliation, and harmonious convergence between formal and informal institutions are essential to institutional relevance, enforceability, sustainability and performance”. This new perspective of institutional reconciliation is best captured by the French expression ‘*enracinement et ouverture*’ coined by Leopold Sedar Senghor, former head of state of Senegal.

The point both Blunt & Jones (1992) and Dia M. (1996) make is that the transfer of management knowledge for both the African private business community and governmental bodies is highly complicated. Even if we embrace the normative transfer mechanism as the most appropriate one, it still is quite difficult to understand how management knowledge is applied. Within the African context, Western management models cannot simply be adopted or copied, but have to be translated. The question is how this takes place. There has been some academic tradition that Africa has to get rid of its traditional and old-fashioned management approaches, and adopt modern ones. Some management studies repeated a pessimistic point of view concerning the African culture. According to these studies, the African cultures have a negative impact on the co-ordination of organisations (Tidiani 1995). The African manager “draws from proverbial, social thought and organises his life in a system of reciprocal social relationships, where the family is the core unit” (Kamoche 2000, 55). Ouattara (1994), Mbigi (1997), and Kessy (1998) see this particular African cultural context as an undeniable dimension for the understanding of African management.

Kiggundu (1998, 226) states that “there is an acute shortage of quality leadership and management in Africa”. Prevailing management styles are authoritarian, personalised, politicised, and “are not conducive for management development and the emergence of new leadership. Enterpreneurial creativity and development are suppressed in favour of bureaucratic risk-averse administration based on absolute obedience”. Hofstede (1993, 86) confirms that we are facing an acute problem of transfer of Western knowledge in the African context and says that “if one thing has become clear, it is that the export of Western-mostly American-management practices and theories to poor countries has contributed little to nothing to their development”. Reviewing the statements developed by all these authors, it becomes clear that the cohesion between social groups does play a relevant role in African management practices. “The prototypical African business organisation often takes on attributes of a community, build on close interpersonal relationships and group

interactions. [...] The community concept affects choice of business objectives and management style, both of which must be congruent with existing social and cultural norms” (Choudhury, 1986 in Grzeda & Assogbavi 1999, 416).

The conjunction of an economic and social logic in the African method of coordinating organisations (Haudeville 1992) creates some to believe that incommensurable worldviews exist between the South and the North. “While Western management emphasises Eurocentrism, individualism, and modernity, African management emphasises ethnocentrism, traditionalism, communalism, and teamwork” (Nzelibe 1986, 11). We do not share this point of view for it implicitly embraces the radical disengagement approach. Although it has to be admitted that cultural differences do play an important role in the translation of management concepts, we should not use these differences as an argument or excuse not to cope with management concepts that originated elsewhere. American managers, for example, initially resisted Japanese quality approaches using cultural differences as an argument, which was ‘bogus’ (Locke 1996, 174). Statements about cultural incompatibility were used to prevent any discussion about the real source of resistance. “Japanese management ideas threatened vested interests” (Locke 1996, 174). We need to be involved in comparative studies to understand processes of convergence/divergence and pay attention “to both emic (culture-specific) and etic (culture-common) aspects of organisational phenomena” (Kamoche 2000, 56).

While discussing the appearance of an African management approach we should like to notice that nowadays a similar discourse is being developed concerning a particular European management approach. The upcoming realisation of a single European market in 1992 introduced the question whether a specific European management approach could be distinguished in contrast with American and Japanese management approaches. Thurley & Wirdenius (1989, XIII) emphasised the urgency of developing a European management approach while there was “a long-term decay in the viability of management within European firms”. They were convinced that a distinct European approach should be developed, but they did not provide one. Calori & Woot (1994, 49) detected a few common characteristics like the capacity to manage international diversity, a strong orientation towards people, a focus on internal negotiation and a quality to manage between extremes. The advantages of promoting a specific European approach is that the transfer of management knowledge will no longer take place in a coercive nor a mimetic way, but in a normative way. European societal norms and values about management will constitute the habitus of the European manager and this habitus will constitute the proper way of translating management concepts within the European context.

The single European market itself, however, “has so far not resulted in standardised norms and rules governing economic activities across Europe, let alone the emergence of distinctly ‘European’ firms which operate quite differently from national ones” (Whitley 1999, 33). Despite the existence of the European Economic Community there is yet no clearly identifiable European management approach other than the recognition that the diversity amongst national institutional arrangements and national business systems has a strong influence on management practices within Europe. The Trans-European manager is still a chimera, but the fact that the issue draws a lot of attention makes clear that the identification of a European managerial habitus will preponderate in determining the processes of translating management concepts to local practices.

With the promotion of the economic development of Africa (the creation of a single market in West Africa, project of African Unity), a similar discussion about the features of an African management style will take place. The appropriateness of management concepts will reflect the tenacity of these national arrangements and systems.

The habitus of the African manager is ingrained in the African culture and a product of an ancestral heritage where life in a community, hospitality and trust play a principal role. The social group is essential to understand the African behaviour of individual members of the African society which is composed of so many different social groups. A social group usually comes from the same region, shares the same moral, its members have common habits, traditions and the same life style. The social group constitutes the founding stone for the African habitus. Within the social group solidarity plays an important role. Ouattara (1994) underlines how difficult it is to cut the ‘cordon umbilical’ between the enterprise and the family. The social cohesion within the group is fundamental for a proper understanding of the action of an individual African. The successful ‘Caisses Populaires’, which are traditional banks in West Africa based on the principle of group warrant called ‘caution solidaire’ is in this context a remarkable example.

### *Ubuntu as a management concept*

In the African tradition, it is the community that defines the person as person. Ubuntu as a translation of the Xhosa expression ‘Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu’ means the person is a person through other persons, and expresses a typical African conception of a person. Mbigi (1997) in *The African Dream in Management* has listed the following relevant principles of Ubuntu: the spirit of unconditional



African collective contribution, solidarity, acceptance, dignity, stewardship, compassion and care, hospitality and legitimacy. Ubuntu is an African cultural worldview that is rooted and anchored in people's daily life. The expression of a person as a person through persons is "common to all African languages and traditional cultures" (Shutte 1993, 46). Ubuntu is a symbol of an African common world-view even if the concept has namesakes in different terms in African countries. Mogobe B. Ramose (1999) made a relevant remark by saying: "African philosophy has long been established in and through Ubuntu. That here not only the Bantu speaking ethnic groups, who use the word Ubuntu or an equivalent for it, are referred to, but the whole population of Sub-Saharan Africa, is based on the argument that in this area 'there is a family atmosphere, that is, a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among and between the indigenous people of Africa'". For example, in West Africa, precisely in Senegal, the concept of 'Teranga' is used to express the spirit of collective hospitality between people. The Zimbabwe concept of 'Ubukhosi' also expresses itself metaphorically in the statement 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu'. So there are similarities between these concepts and the concept of Ubuntu, which reflects an African view on community, which is embodied in customs, institutions and traditions.

According to Shutte (1993), Ubuntu is not synonymous with either Western individualism, collectivism or an entity that can clearly be defined. Ubuntu expresses an African view of the world anchored in their culture, which is difficult to define in a Western context. Ubuntu is enacted in African day-to-day occupations, actions, feelings and thinking, and the African conception of community is still under construction. It is an attempt to shape indigenous social and political institutions, which will be able to develop African nations. According to Sanders (1999), the Zulu phrase 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' has an economy of singular and plural not captured in the banal 'people are people through other people'. The translation of Ubuntu can sound like "a human being is a human being through human beings or the being human of a human being is noticed through his or her being human through human beings" [...] "The ontological figure of Ubuntu is commonly converted into an example and imperative for human conduct".

It can be noticed that Ubuntu represents a specific African worldview. Mbigi (1997) is convinced that this broad worldview can be translated to what he calls *The African Dream in Management*. Although Ubuntu refers to the collective solidarity in Africa, it can find its concrete expression in modern forms of entrepreneurship, business organisations and management. The introduction of Ubuntu as a management concept will not replace the transfer of knowledge from the Western world but will make possible the transfer of knowledge between

partners. Mbigi (1997, 8) differentiates between three kinds of heritages that will constitute a modern version of African management thinking:

- the Northern (European) heritage will continue and contribute to issues such as, strategic planning and control, and the application of financial ratios;
- the Asian heritage will further support African managers in applying techniques to manage value adding processes, process-innovation and measurements of efficiency; and
- the third heritage is African, based on Ubuntu. Ubuntu will help improve the management of people and relationships. «Ubuntu will show a way to work together and will create a rainbow mentality in our organisations characterised by a high degree of cultural, racial, religious, tribal, and political tolerance ».

Based on the respect of these three heritages, African managers can improve their business practices.

It is interesting to see that Mbigi compares Ubuntu to the practice which Japanese firms have introduced in the 1970s under the umbrella of Total Quality Management (TQM). TQM is “a people-focused management system that aims at continual increase in customer satisfaction at continually lower costs. Total Quality (TQ) is a total system approach (not a separate area or program) and an integral part of high-level strategy. It works horizontally across functions and departments, involving all employees, top to bottom, and extend backwards and forwards to include the supply chain and the customers chain” (Lindsay & Patrick 1997, 20). As a management concept, TQM followed the life cycle as many other management concepts. Although the label itself disappeared from the management agenda, the issue of quality itself has been integrated into the comprehensive terminology of the management language. Although managers developed different interpretations of the concept to apply it to their local contexts, the issue itself did not disappear.

We believe that with Ubuntu the same might happen due to the fact that solidarity is a social value, which should be respected and reinforced in society as well as in organisations. Unfortunately, as Mangaliso (2001, 24) underlines, "with all the talk about Ubuntu, the philosophy has not been fully embraced in the workplace since its strategic advantages are not fully appreciated by managers". He is convinced that African managers have to reinforce their communicative abilities in order to translate Ubuntu into an integral part of business practices. "The traditional

management training places greater emphasis on the efficiency of information transfer. Ideas must be translated quickly and accurately into words, the medium of exchange must be appropriate, and the receiver must accurately understand the message. In the Ubuntu context, however, the social effect of conversation is emphasised with primacy given to establishing and reinforcing relationships. Unity and understanding among affected group members is valued above efficiency and accuracy of languages" (Mangaliso 2001, 26). Mangaliso (2001, 32) is convinced that "Ubuntu can improve African business practices as long as they receive the embrace of their host cultures".

Ubuntu as a management concept is more than just a popular version of an employee participation programme defined by the interest of management. We understand the reason Van der Wal & Ramotsehoa's (2001, 4) fear that Ubuntu is sometimes too popularised in business books. "Because of that the tendency is to align it with productivity improvement and worker motivation techniques, which reduces its significance to flavour of the month status". They want to prevent Ubuntu from quickly obtaining a faddish character. They believe that "Ubuntu embraces a set of social behaviours like sharing, seeking consensus and interdependent helpfulness which if recognised, valued and willingly incorporated in the culture of organisations, could exert considerable positive outcomes on business results". However, Van der Wal & Ramotsehoa's fear should not be related to Ubuntu as a management concept, but to the context in which it is applied. The issue is whether managers will use it for strategic purposes or as the basis for communicative action. The purpose of Ubuntu as a societal value is to redefine social relations in society and in organisations. If managers, however, deny this purpose, they will indeed limit Ubuntu as a management concept to its usefulness for specific goals they have defined themselves. Habermas (1980) describes such a situation as strategic action where the diagnosis and the solution of a problem within the organisation is not being shared and commonly performed by all participants. Where management sets the objectives and forces others to accept them, management concepts are only used for strategic purposes. Ubuntu, however, promotes communicative action and managers embracing Ubuntu should support that kind of social interaction. In such a situation, Ubuntu can become a proper management concept that according to the characteristics we have described earlier:

- Ubuntu as a management concept has a striking label.
- Ubuntu already has raised in general terms a specific management issue. « Black managers and professionals need to develop a strong sense of collective social

stewardship [...]. We need a strong sense of collective, social citizenship »(Mbigi 1997, 38). The solidarity tendency to establish solidarity will build « a culture of empowerment and team work in the workplace » (Mbigi 1997, 5);

- Ubuntu, however, has not yet provided a general solution to the identified problem;
- Literature has yet to provide the decisive success stories. There are some fascinating stories about the implementation of Ubuntu in South African business corporations, but they do not seem yet to have reached the status of the key success story. There is the case of Durban Metrorail, which adopted Ubuntu as one of its guiding principles and made the company the Most Progressive Company in Kwazulu-Natal<sup>4</sup>. Patricia P. and A. Scheraga (1998) on the other hand consider the South African Airway to be the best example to illustrate how a major non-American corporation uses the various dimensions of Ubuntu. Another interesting case for the implementation of Ubuntu is CS Holdings<sup>5</sup>. The staff of CS Holdings believes that “the reputation of a company as perceived by the market is as important as the actual services rendered by the company”. CS Holdings obtained this reputation and is a new South African IT company, which forms alliances with firms such as, Ubuntu Technologies, to provide “expertise and knowledge exchange as well as some infrastructure, enabling Ubuntu Technologies to tender for business from which they were previously excluded”. The integration of Ubuntu principles made it possible for CS Holdings to improve its management.

We are aware of the fact that Ubuntu is itself still highly contested. Some have the opinion that it is being abused for political reasons, but we have to respect the fact that the concept Ubuntu is new and is developed in a South African context, which is still in a political turmoil. Others express their doubts about its factual content and others again mistrust its translation into a proper management concept. We, however, believe that if Ubuntu can be developed into a management concept as we have defined it, its usefulness to develop specific African management practices can be convincing. Some recent examples illustrate its implementation. Whether Ubuntu as a concept is ambiguous or idealises a specific African life is irrelevant as long as it can be translated into local practices that clearly provide new African 'best practices'. Hence, the task ahead is to develop it into a proper management concept, which might promote the issue of African solidarity in organisations and establish a novel practice of African business.

*Dialogue between South and North*

Ubuntu will make the Western world aware of the fact that the transfer of knowledge should no longer be defined in terms of 'trading' knowledge from the developed North to the developing South. We also cannot simply stick to a normative transfer of knowledge respecting cultural differences and diversity but upholding Western norms when it comes to management practices to which even African professional associations have to comply. We cannot simply transfer and translate one management idiom into another language, which is what we have illustrated earlier by underlining the crucial role of local discourses in firms in order to determine the meaning of a concept for local practices. We should be aware that Ubuntu has been introduced as a management concept at least in South Africa where a specific African idiom begins to develop to improve human relations in organisations based on indigenous African value systems. Managers and employees start to learn and speak another idiom, which makes it possible to recognise a specific African management approach.

In our description of the characteristics of management concepts, we have stressed that once a concept has obtained these qualities it becomes a knowledge product, which can be transferred to other geographical areas similar to the concepts such as, productivity and Management By Objectives (MBO) during the 1950's and 1960's when these American concepts were introduced in Europe. The same has happened with 'quality' in the 1970's from Japan to the United States and Europe. Since the 1980's, we have seen a remarkable upsurge of concepts in the field of management knowledge that generally originated from the United States. We presume that if Ubuntu reaches the stage of a proper management concept, it is apt to be transferred to other parts of the world. Those who wonder about the ways Europe could develop its own management approach will be interested in the development that takes place in Africa. Within Europe multicultural liberal societies have to deal with large diversities. Debates over multiculturalism have made it clear that the proper functioning of these liberal societies not only depends on the justice of its institutions but also on the qualities and attitudes of its citizens: "e.g. their sense of identity and how they view potentially competing forms of national, regional, ethnic or religious identities; their ability to tolerate and work together with others who are different from themselves; [...] their willingness to show self-restraint and exercise personal responsibility in their economic demands and in personal choices that affect their health and the environment" (Kymlicka & Norman 2000, 6).

In the area of organisation studies, research is being undertaken to merge new views from political philosophy with organisation science to develop the concept of organisational citizenship that includes all relevant behaviours of individual organisation members. “This broader conceptualisation of **organisational citizenship** includes traditional in-role job performance behaviours, organisationally functional extra-role behaviours, and political behaviours, such as full and responsible organisational participation, that typically have been omitted from previous studies of citizenship” (Dyne & Graham 1994, 766). We believe that this new concept of organisational citizenship reflects issues, which are being raised by Ubuntu as well. Translations from one to the other concept and vice versa can strengthen the quality of both concepts. A dialogue, however, will be required to establish proper translations between South and North. A dialogue enables “a free flow of meaning” (Isaacs 1999, 395), because it is a conversation amongst peers. In such a case, everyone will be responsible equally and will create a better understanding of what both Ubuntu and organisational citizenship can mean in different contexts.

Instead of transferring knowledge based on presupposed norms and values about the professional identity of managers such as the normative transfer mechanism presupposes, we need to start a dialogue about the ways African and Western managers use management concepts in practice. This dialogue will clarify how South and North as partners can improve the ways organisations are co-ordinated and challenge the idea that transfer of knowledge can only take place by ‘trading’—in a one way direction, i.e. knowledge from the developed to the developing world. The dialogue steps away from forms of communication between South and North, which are based on asymmetrical power relations and distorted forms of knowledge transfer. “Knowledge is similar to light, weightless and intangible, it can easily travel the world, enlightening the lives of people everywhere” (World Development Report 1998/99, 13). A proper dialogue between those who defend the importance of Ubuntu and organisational citizenship will certainly enhance this travelling of knowledge.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> They call themselves neo-institutionalists while the original institutionalists had the opinion that in organisations « things are not as they seem » (Perrow 1986, 159). They assume that any organisation sold out its own goals in order to survive. The neo-institutionalists question the idea whether an organisation has a goal. They believe that it is necessary to find out how organisations construct their identities in order to legitimise their presence in relevant environments. They do not focus on socio-economic environment, but on the mechanisms for

diffusion ideas through whereby companies survive. Thus, they pay more attention to cultural than economic and technological development patterns.

<sup>2</sup> Space limits us to elaborate on our belief that this translation issue is not only an activity for managers but applies to all participants in an organisation. Therefore our analysis presupposes the validity of the critical theory stating that all participants participate in the construction of meanings that affect their lives (Ph. Johnson & J. Duberley 2000, chapter 6).

<sup>3</sup> Decisions are made necessary by an absence of rules that can be applied.

<sup>4</sup> Durban Metrorail is a South African company of public transport . It had received a success place during the Black Management Forum (1999) for the most Progressive Company in Kwazulu-Natal.

<sup>5</sup> CS Holdings is a South African IT firm. For more informations, please refer to:

[www.cs.co.za/reconstructionand\\_development.htm](http://www.cs.co.za/reconstructionand_development.htm)

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- <http://www.google/ubuntu> to see the latest articles on Ubuntu.

# UJAMAA, A PHANTOM

**Caspar Schweigman**

## *Introduction*

Someone who was in Tanzania during the time of ujamaa and today reads about ideas of African Renaissance and Ubuntu cannot refrain from giving ujamaa experiences a new thought. From the end of 1974 until early 1979 I was a lecturer at the University of Dar es Salaam, in the Mathematics Department. As an applied mathematician I was involved in methods of agricultural planning. I was one of the European lecturers at the university, who were inspired and challenged by the efforts of the young nation to find its own way of development. Tanzania wanted to be independent, to be neither under the umbrella of the West, nor of the East. I went there with high expectations of the views of the President, Nyerere, on human dignity and equality, the fight against exploitation and his ideas about education. In this paper the ideas of ujamaa and its implementation during the 1960s and 1970s are reviewed and I have attempted to draw some lessons. First, in a historical perspective, issues which influenced the development of ujamaa are discussed.

Tanzania became independent in 1961. During the first years of independence some successful initiatives were launched: a programme to eradicate illiteracy by adult education campaigns and free primary school education<sup>1</sup>, the setting up of a free basic health care system and improved water supply. Tanzania had chosen for a one - party system. In the years before independence, the party TANU<sup>2</sup> had become very popular and was developed into a rural mass organization<sup>3</sup>. Its basic principles of equality, freedom and unity had a strong appeal. During the first elections, the party and its president received an overwhelming support from almost the whole population. The one-party system was justified by Nyerere as follows<sup>4</sup>. In the Tanzanian society consensus existed on basic principles. In such a society there would be no conflicts of interest. The democratic processes of decision making and development would be more effective in an one-party than in a multi-party system. The party was supposed to be a mass movement based on national consensus.

## *Industry and agriculture*

As in many African countries, during a short time after independence the development of industry, even of heavy industry, was put high on Tanzania's

agenda. Many people thought that industrialization was the most important motor of development<sup>5</sup>. Tanzania was one of the first African developing countries to recognize that such ambitions were set much too high, and that it was a mistake to think that development starts with industry. There was a lack of technological know-how and skilled manpower. In the Arusha Declaration of 1967, in which important policy changes were introduced, a shift was made<sup>6</sup>. The development of Tanzania was to be based on agriculture. The country was to be self-reliant in food production and cash crop production would generate income for both farmers and the state.

For many generations, small scale farming has been the backbone of Tanzanian agriculture. Most farmers grow food crops for their own consumption and some cash crops like cotton, coffee or tea for extra income. In the colonial days<sup>7</sup> the British frequently attempted to change the traditional farming system, for many reasons. They wanted farmers to participate in a market economy and supply food to the urban centre of Dar es Salaam. Moreover, they wanted to extract a surplus from the farmers to pay the colonial administration, infrastructure and welfare services. The colonial power was eager to make its colonial territories economically self-reliant. It was therefore necessary to increase agricultural production and to introduce improved modes of production. Several initiatives were taken in this regard: plantation agriculture, e.g. for groundnuts and sisal, private settlements employing African farm labourers, migration of wage labourers, and laws<sup>8</sup> and rules to regulate land use and farming practices. The legal measures were strict<sup>9</sup>. If regulations were not respected, fines and short prison terms could be imposed. The coercion and the regulations interfering in farmers' traditional practice met a lot of resistance, which was one of the reasons why the party TANU received strong support. The plantation schemes were not very successful. The last years before independence many schemes and regulations were abandoned. The British changed their policy from the use of force to 'persistent persuasion' of farmers who showed an interest in change.

In the 1950s and 1960s a discussion developed on how a government could intervene in order to increase production by peasant smallholders. Two different approaches had their adherents. One was the settlement approach, according to which new settlements were to be created on state farms, plantations or settler-owned enterprises. The work had to be done by wage labourers. It was thought that taking farmers out of their traditional social environment would make them more open to change. The other approach, called the improvement approach, referred to improvement of practice on existing peasant farms. The main problem was how the government could reach the peasants scattered all over the country and introduce

improved methods of land use and agriculture. During the years before and after independence these two approaches were debated in evaluation reports by the World Bank and other policy documents<sup>10</sup>. For a brief time after independence the new Government seemed to sympathize with the settlement approach, later the improvement approach was chosen. It is in this context that the ideas of ujamaa developed.

### *Ujamaa*

The ideas of ujamaa were developed by Nyerere. His first paper on the issue appeared in 1962<sup>11</sup>. Ujamaa became part of Tanzanian policy in 1967, when the Arusha Declaration was adopted.

Ujamaa is the Kiswahili word for family-hood and was used as a term for African Socialism. According to Nyerere, the use of the word ujamaa to describe the ideas behind the policies to be developed would reflect “a full acceptance of our African-ness and a belief that in our past there is very much which is useful for our future”<sup>12</sup>. No socialist ideology was copied from the East or the West but an African Socialism was developed. Nyerere describes the basic principles of this socialism in various places and in slightly different wordings. He writes, for instance, about “a society in which all members have equal rights and equal opportunities; in which all can live at peace with their neighbours without suffering or imposing injustice, being exploited, or exploiting; and in which all have gradually increasing basic level of material welfare before any individual lives in luxury”<sup>13</sup>. It was emphasized that socialism is a belief<sup>14</sup>, a way of life. A socialist society can only be built by people who believe in it. In his writings Nyerere often emphasizes the struggle against exploitation of man by man. “Socialism means that no person uses his wealth to exploit others just as a father does not use his status to dominate or exploit his wife, children and other relatives ...”<sup>15</sup>. The Arusha Declaration states that “it is the responsibility of the state ... to prevent the exploitation of one person by another or one group by another, and so as to prevent the accumulation of wealth to an extent which is inconsistent with the existence of a classless society”<sup>16</sup>. The root of exploitation is private ownership. It was believed that private ownership of the means of production would necessarily lead to the exploitation of man by man<sup>17</sup>.

Nyerere claimed that the traditional Tanzanian society had socialist characteristics. In *Socialism and Rural Development* three are discussed: respect for each other, common property and the obligation to work. Before Africa was colonized there

were no rich people in Africa. All people were workers, there was no great difference in the amount of goods available to the different members of society<sup>18</sup>. Social security was safeguarded by the community. 'Respect' meant a mutual concern for each other. "Each member of the family recognized the place and the rights of the other members, and also the rights varied according to sex, age, ... there was a minimum below which no one could exist without disgrace to the whole family"<sup>19</sup>. Land was not the property of one single person. All basic goods were held in common. "No one could go hungry while others hoarded food and no one could be denied shelter if others had space to spare". Everyone had an obligation to work. "Every member of the family, and every guest who shared in the right to eat and have shelter, took it for granted that he had to join in whatever work had to be done".

### *Ujamaa policies*

The socialist policies of Tanzania were implemented at various levels. Some policies had little to do with African tradition. It was, for instance, claimed<sup>20</sup> that all major means of production had to be owned and controlled by the peasants and workers through the machinery of the Government and Party, which were supposed to represent them. The government was to play a central role. Another policy was related to the fighting of exploitation: strict measures were taken to forbid all civil servants and party members to own farms, to run shops, to have more than one house etc. It was even discouraged to hire labour to work on farms. The most important paper on ujamaa, *Socialism and Rural Development*, says the following on this issue<sup>21</sup>: "... in the rural areas of Tanzania it is possible to produce enough crops to give an agricultural worker a decent life, with money for a good house and furniture, some reserve for old age, and so on. But the moment such a man extends his farm to the point where it is necessary to employ labourers in order to plant or harvest the full acreage, then the traditional system of ujamaa has been killed". The Government also took measures to prevent exploitation of peasants by private traders, by way of co-operative unions, marketing boards and price policies. Not only the means of production, but also the means of exchange had to be controlled by the government.

The most important implementation of ujamaa during the years after 1967 was the campaign of Ujamaa Vijijini, which aimed at a gradual and later complete transformation of the rural areas into socialist communities, where all political and economic activities are collectively organized<sup>22</sup>. From 1968 until 1973 the mobilization of peasants to set up such communities was a high priority for

Government and Party. Agricultural organization was that of a co-operative, living and working 'for the good of all'. The people would live and work as a community. They would work on the farm together, jointly be involved in marketing activities and local services. People were to live together in a village, so that it would be easier to send children to school, to construct a community building, to organize water supply and other facilities. It was believed that communal organization of work could make agricultural activities more efficient, a better use could be made of results of agricultural research and of extension services. Gradually, the traditional agricultural practices could be modernized. In the beginning of the campaign Ujamaa Vijijini, it was emphasized that no coercion was to be used<sup>23</sup>. The bad experiences with coercion in the colonial times were not forgotten. Instead, it was attempted to persuade people, by mobilizing party members and government officials and stressing self-help and mutual co-operation. At a national and regional level the government co-ordinated the establishment of ujamaa villages. All credit, extension and other services went to the ujamaa villages at the expense of the individual producer. The final aim was to create a nation in which ujamaa villages would dominate the rural economy and set the social pattern for the whole country. The people's reaction to this 'socialism from above' was very mixed. It varied from initiatives by local people<sup>24</sup>, who were inspired by the teachings of Nyerere, and campaigns<sup>25</sup> organized by party and government officials, to indifference, misunderstandings, hesitant introduction of communal practices, and even reluctance and hostility. The major opposition was directed against collective farming. Where it was adopted, mainly cash crops were collectively cultivated, but each family tried to keep its private fields for food production. By 1974 almost 2.5 million<sup>26</sup> people (nearly 20% of the rural population) were said to live in 5000 ujamaa villages<sup>27</sup>. They were mainly in the less fertile regions of Tanzania, like Dodoma and Singida.

### *Compulsory villagization*

In 1973 and 1974 Tanzania faced severe economic problems. The rise in oil prices was a terrible blow. It coincided with a drought which decreased food production. Food had to be imported at the expense of foreign currency reserves<sup>28</sup>. Moreover, the ujamaa initiatives did not at all show the expected economic results, in spite of the concentrated efforts and inputs by the government. The President urged for a rapid villagization of the rural population. In the views of the Government, villagization was as an absolute pre-condition for development. Only in nucleated villages could the government provide all necessary facilities and inputs to increase agricultural production. There would be no time to wait for voluntary villagization

based on education of the people. In a radio message broadcast on the 6th of November 1973, Nyerere announced that all rural people were obliged to settle in a village before 1976. In 1974 'Operation Vijiji' (villagization) was started. Villages had to be registered and all people had to live in a registered village. Finances were allocated to Operation Vijiji rather than to ujamaa villages. People had to move from small villages to bigger ones, and from scattered settlements to nucleated villages. The compulsory villagization between 1973 and 1976 was one of the largest settlement efforts in Africa. It concerned millions of people. If necessary, force was to be used by the people's militia, the army, party and governmental officials. Although the State-owned press and radio did not give much publicity to incidents and to the use of force, many sources have revealed that pressure and violence by means of regulations, economic measures, threats, burning down of houses and physical violence occurred on a large scale<sup>29</sup>. During the compulsory settlement the name ujamaa village was no longer emphasized, the villagization programme was aimed at the creation of mere 'villages'. The requirement that part of the farming had to be done collectively was dropped. In 1976 all villages were registered and all rural people (about 13 million people) lived there. For a great deal of them, especially in the fertile regions like Arusha, Kilimanjaro, Rungwe and West Lake, the changes were only administrative; no nucleated arrangements were made.

### *Comment*

Nyerere developed his ideas about ujamaa in a period, when Tanzania was looking for its own identity and tried to set out its own path of development. It wanted to rely on its own strength and qualities. What were the distinguishing qualities, which could help in the process of development? It is not surprising that solidarity and mutual help came into the picture. In the rural areas it was common practice indeed that farmers helped each other, during peak times and in emergency situations. However, this type of collaboration was temporary, and based on reciprocity. One helped each other, since one could expect to be helped himself later, if necessary. This type of collaboration is quite different from the permanent collaboration envisaged in the ujamaa villages, which implied communal ownership, collective work and production, and sharing of benefits. The appeal to this way of collaboration was not successful. In spite of the enormous political and economic investments and the massive campaigns, the ujamaa policies failed<sup>30</sup>. The results were disastrous: poor levels of agricultural production, frustrations, suffering, political discontents and high costs. I will try to draw some lessons from the ujamaa experiences by commenting on the following issues: 1) the relation

between ujamaa and villagization; 2) ujamaa: wish or African reality? 3) contradictions of ujamaa ; 4) reasons why ujamaa policies failed.

1) *Ujamaa and villagization*. The ideas of ujamaa were introduced at a time when the government had already defined priorities, in particular those of primary education, basic health care and improved water supply. These basic services were considered to be prerequisites for any social and economic development. It would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to create such services for all people scattered all over the country, without the creation of nucleated villages. This was one of the reasons for the villagization programme. These basic facilities had to be financed. Since Tanzania was not endowed with rich mining resources and an industrial sector had not yet been developed, the financing of the services had to come from a surplus from the peasants. For the government it was therefore an important pre-occupation, as it was for the colonial governments, to increase agricultural production. Since initiatives of large scale settlements with mechanized methods of land use and modern methods of agriculture were not successful, the government opted for concentrating efforts on trying to improve farming practices of the peasant smallholders. How the farmers could be reached by the government in order to help them to improve their land use and agricultural practices was a crucial issue. Here again, the creation of nucleated villages to group the farmers to facilitate extension services, supply of inputs and marketing of agricultural produce, appeared to be a logical step for the government. It is against this background that the development of the ideas of ujamaa has to be assessed. In fact, the villagization programme was not the result of ujamaa. On the contrary, the development of ujamaa seems to have been rather the result of the wish for villagization, and of the need to justify that villagization.

2) *Ujamaa: wish or African reality?* On one hand, ujamaa was presented as an ideology aimed at building a desired society. Even as a desired way of life. In this respect ujamaa is a normative concept, and some of its basic principles like equal rights, equal opportunities and respect for each other can be found in many programmes of socialist political parties, which strive at a just society. On the other hand, it was claimed by Nyerere, that the basis of ujamaa, solidarity, already existed in the traditional Tanzanian society. He referred to 'basic goods held in common' and 'social security secured by the community' as well as many other characteristics. This claimed African-ness is the heart of the matter. Hyden<sup>31</sup> quite correctly remarks, that solidarity mainly exists within one household or extended family and not between different households or families in a village. I will challenge the generalisation of Nyerere's observations for other reasons. Examples of solidarity refer to situations where groups of people live together during a certain



period of time under very specific environmental, social, political and economic conditions. If the people are isolated and no formal systems of security exist it is not surprising that people have to rely on the family or neighbours for social security. Solidarity between the people exists, not because they are African, but because they live in very specific conditions.

If conditions change, the characteristics of human behaviour may change as well. The capacity of human beings to adapt to changing conditions is well known. For this capacity much evidence exists in history, also in the history of agricultural changes in the colonial days in Tanzania. If there are “basic” unchangeable features at the root of a society, then they are not specifically African, but “human”, such as universal goals of physical well being and of social well being. This is well accepted in sociology<sup>32</sup>. All other characteristics such as solidarity are the results of these universal goals and of external conditions.

3) *Contradictions of ujamaa*. The term ‘socialism from above’, which has been often used as a translation for the ujamaa policies, reflects the main contradiction of ujamaa. Originally, the ujamaa village policy was supposed to be based on the initiatives of the farmers themselves. Self-help and mutual co-operation were the key words. The role of the government was to support such initiatives. Gradually the initiatives were taken by the government. Ujamaa became a process from above. The government wanted to ‘educate’ the advantages of communal activities. In retrospect, one may be surprised that this contradiction did not raise more discussion. This may be due to the lack of democracy. Although in the writings of Nyerere and the Arusha Declaration democracy is often mentioned (‘true socialism cannot exist without democracy’<sup>33</sup>) no publication was clear about the issue of what democracy really meant in the Tanzanian one-party system. The participation of the people themselves in introducing ujamaa villages was never properly discussed in the public media, which were in the hands of the government. Top-down approaches replaced bottom-up approaches.

4) *Reasons for failure*. Aside from the contradiction of ‘socialism from above’, there are many other reasons why the ujamaa policies failed. Ideas, such as equality, respect for human dignity and the wish to prevent exploitation of man by man, are of a moral and normative nature. They are not incentives to work together, to invest more in agricultural practice or to increase agricultural production. Such changes have to be based on social or economic incentives<sup>34</sup> as well. Cliffe<sup>35</sup> and Cunningham write: if the villagization programmes are to be voluntary, then the peasants have to be convinced that real economic gains can be achieved through larger scale, collective farming and that social gains can be derived from living in communal settlements.

The assumption that ujamaa is based on ‘the principles of the extended family system with its emphasis on co-operation and mutual respect and responsibility’ does not allow one to conclude that in new conditions collective farming necessarily leads to an efficient division of labour, better organisation or harder work by the people. Not enough attention was given to the rationale of collective farming.

Ujamaa villages had to be introduced at such a speed and at such a large scale, that many people had little or no idea of what was required of them, let alone the technical and organizational problems they were going to meet.

Lack of preparation; lack of expertise in the field of collective farming, of new farming technologies and management of communal villages; lack of local leadership; too much bureaucracy by the government and party; price policies of the government etcetera are other reasons why the introduction of ujamaa villages failed.

## **Conclusions**

The main conclusion is, that it is false to believe that ujamaa is or was an African reality. It was a way of thinking imposed by the President and Government of Tanzania, in order to reach political and economic objectives. The claim that the imposed ujamaa policies had African roots was therefore also false. In fact, these policies failed, since realities in practice and views of the local people were not sufficiently taken into account.

The basic ideas of ujamaa, such as solidarity, are normative concepts. Whether they play an important role in a local society, depends to a large extent on external political and economic conditions.

At an individual level these normative concepts can be inspiring for human behaviour. They are, however, not necessarily a motor for social or economic reforms. Such reforms can only be accomplished, if specific social or economic incentives exist and are perceived by the concerned people.

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The proportion of Tanzanian children in primary school was 34% in 1970 and rose to 100 % in 1979. In the eighties it went down to a level of 63% in 1990; quoted in McHenry, 1994, p.

- 85, on the basis of World Tables 1992 and 1993, published by the World Bank.
- <sup>2</sup> Tanganyika African National Union. In 1964 Tanganyika and Zanzibar were united into Tanzania. In 1973, TANU merged with the main political party of Zanzibar and a new name was adopted: Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM).
- <sup>3</sup> For a description of the reasons why TANU was so successful in the years after its foundation in 1954 and became a mass organization, see Iliffe, 1972.
- <sup>4</sup> See Boesen et al., 1977, p. 14, and Nyerere's address to the Annual Conference in 1963 of the ruling party TANU (on which occasion it was decided to establish a one-party state), in Nyerere, 1963.
- <sup>5</sup> "It was widely believed during that period, that industrialization was the unique key to development and that the industrial sector, as the advanced sector, would pull with it the backward agricultural sector" wrote Thorbecke in his book on 'the role of agriculture in economic development' (1969). These views were consistent with the views on development, fashionable in the 1950s and early 60s, that "development" was synonymous with "modernization". Developed, or "advanced" economies with their high levels of consumption and advanced technology were seen as examples for less developed countries to imitate.
- <sup>6</sup> See Arusha Declaration, 1967.
- <sup>7</sup> For a discussion of agricultural policies in the colonial times (by the Germans and the British), see Hyden, 1980, p. 38 – 69. See also Cliffe, 1972a, and Coulson, 1982, p. 33 – 69.
- <sup>8</sup> The regulations in the colonial times could be very detailed, dealing with compulsory tie-riding, destruction of old cotton plants, compulsory growing of famine crops like cassava etc., see Cliffe, 1972.
- <sup>9</sup> For a revealing justification given by the British colonial administrators of the use of a 'little compulsion', see Williams, 1982, p. 106.
- <sup>10</sup> See Hyden, 1980, p. 71-72.
- <sup>11</sup> See Nyerere, 1962.
- <sup>12</sup> See Nyerere, 1967a, p. 316.
- <sup>13</sup> See Nyerere, 1967b, p. 340.
- <sup>14</sup> See Arusha Declaration, 1967, p. 234.
- <sup>15</sup> See Nyerere, 1966b, p. 142.
- <sup>16</sup> See Arusha Declaration, 1967, p. 232.
- <sup>17</sup> See Ngombale-Mwiru, 1973, p. 53.
- <sup>18</sup> See Nyerere, 1966b, p. 137.
- <sup>19</sup> See Nyerere, 1967b, p. 338.
- <sup>20</sup> See Arusha Declaration, 1967, p. 233.
- <sup>21</sup> See Nyerere, 1967b, p. 342 – 343.
- <sup>22</sup> See Boesen et al. 1977, p. 11.
- <sup>23</sup> See United Republic of Tanzania, 1969, p. 4, and Nyerere, 1967b, p. 356.
- <sup>24</sup> Already in 1962 and 1963 some 'spontaneous settlements schemes' were started as a response to Nyerere's calls. The most well known was the Ruvuma Development Association (RDA). It was quite successful, in terms of both organization, democratic decision making and economic development. RDA villages became self-sufficient in food production, improved people's health and nutrition, built schools and water supply systems and even started village industries. In the early years RDA attracted a lot of attention. Later frictions arose with the Government. The RDA did not want the government to interfere, it wanted to be autonomous. In 1969 the Government decided to disband the RDA. Assets were confiscated and staff had to

- leave. See Coulson, 1982, p. 263 – 271.
- <sup>25</sup> In 1968 the Government started an ujamaa village campaign in Rufiji District, in order to move the population of the flood plains of the Rufiji River to higher flood plain banks. The villagization was also an emergency campaign, since a large flood caused a destruction of crops and houses, as it had happened frequently in the past. It was very difficult to convince the peasants to move from the flood plain land of their ancestors to the higher, less fertile escarpments. Although the farmers recognized the dangers of floods, they only very reluctantly took part in the move of the villages. In 1973, 75% of the population had moved. Resistant villages faced a lot of problems, no trading licences, no maintenance of roads etc. For a description of ‘Operation Rufiji’, see e.g. Havnevik, 1993, p. 218 – 226. Another large ujamaa campaign launched by the Government was ‘Operation Dodoma’, in which Nyerere personally actively participated, see e.g. Hyden, 1980, p. 102
- <sup>26</sup> See Kitching, G., 1982, p. 106 and Coulson, 1982, p. 241.
- <sup>27</sup> Criteria to be registered as an ujamaa village were not always clear. For instance, in the South of Tanzania, towards the border with Mozambique, people were brought together in ujamaa villages for national defence purposes. These villages were created and armed to prevent Portuguese infiltration in Tanzania in search of guerilla fighters. Ujamaa communal farming activities were only applied to a limited extent. See Hyden, 1980, p. 101.
- <sup>28</sup> See Boesen et al., 1977, p. 170.
- <sup>29</sup> See e.g. Coulson 1982, p. 250 – 252 and Williams, 1982, p. 114 – 118, in which reference is made to many reports in daily papers and other reports. See also Shivji et al. 1985, p. 18.
- <sup>30</sup> This does not imply that the Tanzanian development in those days failed. The provision of basic services set up within old and new villages were important assets, and even the economic development in these years showed some growth. See e.g. Kitching, 1982, p. 124.
- <sup>31</sup> See Hyden, 1980, p. 99.
- <sup>32</sup> For instance, affection, behavioural confirmation and status, see e.g. Lindenberg (1996) and Ormel et al., 1999, p. 61 – 90.
- <sup>33</sup> See *Arusha Declaration*, 1967, p.234, in Nyerere, 1968.
- <sup>34</sup> See also Ngotyana, B., 1973, *The Strategy of Rural Development*, in Cliffe et al., 1973.
- <sup>35</sup> See Cliffe, L., Cunningham, G.L., 1973, *Ideology, Organisation and the Settlement Experience in Tanzania*, p.131, in: Cliffe et al., 1973.

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## PHILOSOPHIES OF AFRICAN RENAISSANCE IN AFRICAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

**Pieter Boele van Hensbroek**

"Each race is endowed with peculiar talents, and watchful to the last degree is the great Creator over the individuality, the freedom and the independence of each. In the music of the universe, each shall give a different sound, but necessary to the grand symphony." Thus, "be yourselves ... if you surrender your personality, you have nothing left to give the world." "The African must advance by methods of his own ... distinct from the European."<sup>1</sup>

"What shall it profit a race if it shall gain the whole world and lose its own soul?"<sup>2</sup>

"How can a people be alive when its God and spirit are dead?"<sup>3</sup>

"By seeking to run away from themselves and emulate the white man, they are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them as black."<sup>4</sup>

"An unambiguous identity, an African identity; a people with a particular history, a people with a particular civilisation, a people who are unique in their socialisation."<sup>5</sup>

These quotations express a similar view of Africa and of culture in general. They fit together as if belonging to one author. Yet, they are quotations of African authors who lived more than 100 years apart, namely Edward Wilmot Blyden, sometimes identified as "the greatest nineteenth century black intellectual," Joseph Casely Hayford, a prominent intellectual and political leader in the Gold Coast between 1890 and the 1920s, K.C. Anyanwu, a contemporary Nigerian philosopher, Steve Biko, the late South African Black Consciousness activist, and, finally, the introduction to a comprehensive 1998 South African book titled *African Renaissance*.

Quotations from many other African and African-American intellectuals could have been added, such as from Marcus Garvey, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Cheikh Anta Diop, or from contemporary American Afrocentrists or African ethno-philosophers. However, for my purpose the quotations suffice. They show that similar lines of thought have reappeared at different times in African intellectual history. We may learn from this history, from the earlier formulations of the idea of African Renaissance as well as from the debates among African intellectuals about them. Such historical debates were often of high intellectual standard and very interesting indeed, although rarely studied today even by African philosophers. The historical debates provide insight into the rich, multifaceted and inspiring meaning



that the idea of African Renaissance can express, as well as insight into a set of standard intellectual weaknesses and political pitfalls that it can entail. Intellectual history may thus help us to assess in exactly which respects today's protagonists of African Renaissance avoid the classical problems related to their position and in exactly what ways they contribute new elements for a renewed blossoming of a philosophy of African Renaissance.

Such a comparative perspective between present and past intellectual movements should be careful to avoid simple equations. Ideas are always part of a very specific debate, and receive their meaning in this specific intellectual, political and cultural context. Discourses are always historically situated and cannot be compared in a simple way. It can happen, therefore, that ideas with a similar intellectual content can still serve quite different intellectual and political purposes, depending upon the specific historical context. For instance, Blyden, the conservative neo-traditionalist, and Biko, the activist, were politically worlds apart, despite their intellectual similarity; and both of them were politically at quite a distance from the African Renaissance promotion in South Africa today, which was ignited by the ruling president and party.

This essay proceeds in three steps. First, it discusses the intellectual structure of the view about African culture that is expressed in the quotations above. Second, it reviews the classical criticisms that this view about African culture has raised in historical debates. Finally, with the help of another great African intellectual - Amilcar Cabral -, it tries to "draw the line" between what may be very enlightening and liberating ways of mobilising culture and identity for an African renaissance and what may be misleading, an even objectionable and politically suspect references to cultural 'roots', 'tradition', and 'Africanness'.

### *The Intellectual Structure*

In the past fifty years, the analysis of the African condition has mostly been undertaken from a development paradigm, or from a paradigm around terms such as oppression and imperialism. Presently, however, it has become popular to think in terms of what could be called a culture paradigm. This "cultural turn" can also be observed in analyses of Western societies, for instance in the characteristic of these societies as 'multicultural', as well as in analyses of international relations in terms of a 'clash of cultures'. This culture paradigm has received new impetus recently by ethno-religious global terrorists claiming to defend the true Muslim world. Note that the notion of "crusaders" - as name for their enemy - is a term that refers to religious wars, whereas their aim seems to be primarily political, namely eliminating American presence in the Gulf region. The American response with an

unmistakably geopolitical agenda is often worded in similarly cultural terms, namely as a defence of the core values of Western civilisation.

In Africa - as well as in writings about Africa - a culture paradigm has become more popular in the last decade. However, such an approach is far from new. As the quotations at the beginning of this essay indicate (and as I have shown in more detail elsewhere), one can identify in African intellectual history a family of authors, all sharing the idea that there is a distinctively African culture and life-experience, or a way of "being-in-the-world" as some philosophers inspired by Heidegger phrase it.<sup>6</sup>

Let me try to map the ground plan, the *genetic code*, so to say, of this intellectual family. In my view, this ground plan can best be read from the classical nineteenth century work of Edward Wilmot Blyden. Blyden was born in a family of free blacks on the small Caribbean island of St. Thomas. He migrated to the "Negro" republic of Liberia at the age of eighteen, in 1851, shortly after Liberian independence. He became a flamboyant public figure, a self-educated, prolific writer, and the leading spokesman and inspirer of the West-African so-called "educated elite". He preached a reaffirmation of African identity and 'race pride' in opposition to colonial and missionary paternalism.

Initially, Blyden (like his colleague Alexander Crummell) considered it to be his mission to bring Christianity and the message of Pan-Negroism to Africa in order to civilise the "pagan, black brethren", who had to be "raised from the slumber of the ages and rescued from a stagnant barbarism". But he overcame these Abolitionist prejudices by studying African history and societies, as well as by travels to the interior and even to Egypt.<sup>7</sup> Thus he became a vocal African cultural nationalist. At some point, he even considered Christianity to be unfit for Africa, which was a revolutionary view in the historical context of the West African coastal settlements where the missionary societies were ruling much of the society.<sup>8</sup>

Blyden was probably the first author to use the seminal term "African personality." His later work provides an elaborate, what one could call 'Afrocentric', philosophy. He framed many of the standard statements about Africans and African culture, such as that it is spiritual, social, communal, consensus-minded, full of emotion, rhythm, and of sensitivity. In his own florid style:

The supple, yielding, conciliatory, obedient, gentle, patient, musical spirit that is not full of offensive resistance - how sadly the white man needs it! ... the Anglo-Saxon. He is so dreadfully determined, so intolerant and self-assertive, intent upon carrying his point at all hazards, having good in view of course; but the wheels of his mind and understanding need oiling sadly with the oil of African good nature.<sup>9</sup>

Blyden was a remarkable intellectual who developed these ideas in a more consistent and sophisticated manner than most of his twentieth century followers, and applied an 'Afrocentric' view to a broad range of issues. He discussed, for instance, possible causal explanations for Africa's specific character by theorising about the natural environment, climate, human 'races,' and about the divinely sanctioned order of things. Furthermore, Blyden elaborated on the normative and practical consequences of the view that there is a specifically African 'race'. Many of his texts and sermons concern race-pride, the obligation to guard one's African identity and to save "the African as an African." For this purpose he was proposing the outlines of an African curriculum, propagating African institutions of higher learning, and an African church.

Blyden's texts stand out by the superb way in which they express many of the deep sentiments, worries and hopes related to this idea of "Africa". In his florid and imaginative style of writing, he depicted the African condition as a perilous act in the world-historical drama that started with the arrival of the white man in Africa and that threatens everything truly 'African' with extinction. Given the magnitude of this drama, no political remedy, such as the expulsion of the white man from Africa, can be an efficient remedy. The basic task is cultural, namely that Africa returns to its African roots. Towards the end of his life, Blyden went so far in his culturalism that he did not even have a problem with colonialism, if Africans were given the space to live according to their own culture.<sup>10</sup>

From Blyden as an historical exemplar - an ideal-type of a culture-centred view of Africa - I can now proceed to an analysis of the logic of such a view. What ideas and typical combinations of ideas typify the logic of a culturalist, 'Afrocentric' position?

The 'genetic code' of a Blydenite model of thought, I maintain, is the combination of two basic assumptions. First, an essentialist idea of cultures, i.e. culture conceived of as a kind of 'body' or 'entity' held together by a strong internal coherence of even a core or essence. Second, the idea that people 'belong' in a culture, that a person should be anchored in a culture, that the cultural framework is a condition for being authentic. Following Samir Amin in his famous study *Eurocentrism*, one can call such model of thought "culturalist". The culturalist way of thinking, then, identifies cultural (or racial) units and perceives the natural place of a person to be within his or her unit. Although present-day authors usually speak in terms of 'cultures', whereas Blyden spoke in terms of 'races,' I would maintain that the culturalist logic is in both cases the same.<sup>11</sup>

Once an author adopts the basic assumptions of a culturalist framework, a number of other ideas follow almost automatically. I mention just four. First, a culture tends to be conceived of as a complete mode of being that is distinct from

other modes. Typically, however, this mode is not given a characteristic in its own right but in its distinctions from the opposite modes. In most texts, the African mode is not sketched in direct opposition the Western template by stating that it is *not*-individualistic or *not*-materialistic; the "We" is constructed as the mirror-image of the "They" (see below). A second consequence of culturalist assumptions is that cultural identities are perceived as having deep roots. One could also say that the "We" is projected back into history, defining its long ancestry and suggesting roots deep down in the psyche. European culturalists tend to reconstruct their prehistory back to ancient Greece, African culturalists trace a history going back to ancient Egypt. A third consequence is that one tends to perceive everyone within the cultural unit as belongs naturally together. Differences of interest and of views tend to be played down or are declared to be artificial. The Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji called this "the myth of unanimity". The counterpart to this tendency to perceive natural unities is that persons or elements coming from outside the cultural unit automatically obtain the status of 'alien' elements whose influence will disturb rather than enrich the culture. A final consequence of culturalist assumptions is a tendency to construct 'overconditioned' boundaries. Instead of the complicated realities on the ground where linguistic, ethnic, national and historical boundaries rarely overlap, one tends to create a picture of coinciding boundaries of a continent, a race, a culture, a colour, a personality, a history, a philosophy, a political orientation, and religious orientation. Culturalist thought tends to over-generalise and absolutise cultural divisions.

### *Reading from African Intellectual History: Inspirations and Classical Problems*

Armed with the insight in the logic of culturalist positions which I obtained of the previous paragraph, I can now try to develop a more critical view at this type of discourse. What is the message and inspiration of discourses on African Renaissance? What are its classical pitfalls?

Let me start with a remark about methodological issues that come up in the assessment of political discourses. Both the nature of such discourses and the position of the analyst have to be clarified. Discourses on African Renaissance aim generally at much more than formulating a factual state of affairs, such as the claim of a basic unity of African cultures or statements about the specific nature of the African culture or personality. They can also be attempts to inspire fellow Africans, to define a 'way ahead', to claim recognition, to defend dignity or to impress non-Africans. Similarly, they can be attempts at justifying political leadership, creating a context for overcoming differences between groups; they can also be claims against dominant 'truths' in the guise of received views on development, progress,

civilisation, or the good life. Finally, they can be statements of philosophical alternatives to standard views about man and society.

In view of this broad scope of practices of which a discourse on African renaissance may be part, the analysis that I propose to make in this essay and that focuses only on philosophy or politics can easily appear too one-sided and cheap. However, the fact that the agenda of African Renaissance can be broad and multifaceted does not exclude the possibility of critical assessment. Especially where 'renaissanists' explicitly make philosophical or political claims, such assessment is legitimate and even necessary for the progressive development of ideas on African Renaissance. Furthermore, assessment brings into play the assessor. If hermeneutics brings into play the person interpreting, as Gadamer taught us, then this is *a fortiori* the case with critical assessment. The position that I want to take here can be compared to that of the parliamentary journalist who critically questions delegates and office holders (being often more persistent in his questioning than the office holders like!), but who does not himself attempt to take office. The criticism that is attempted here tries to compare African Renaissance philosophies basically to their own standards, especially to their aim to formulate a new and viable, 'African', approach to solve problems in Africa. How successful can they be in achieving this aim?

I will scan the major debates in African political thought in the last hundred years, such as that on Negritude, on Ujamaa and Zambian Humanism, on African Socialism, ethno-philosophy and Afrocentrism, and on democracy, to highlight the classical problems that can arise when analysing the African condition in terms of culture and identity.

### *Empirical matters*

A first classical problem is that of empirical underpinning. What reasons are given to accept the statements about African culture, African identity, African philosophy, or African personality? Texts that make an effort to sketch what the author considers to be the typically African nature of his or her object mostly do without detailed empirical data of references to studies that provide such data. The reader is expected to accept the validity of the statements on the authority or origin of the author. Complications in data collection, questions of validity or reliability of information and issues of interpretation seem to be absent.

The classical example of this problem of empirical grounding is Placide Tempels' highly influential book *Bantu Philosophy* which appeared in the 1940s. *Bantu Philosophy* provides an elaborate exposition of Bantu thought, but finally it is unclear to what degree it informs us about the way Bantu people think and to

what degree it is Tempels' thought or a transformation of the European Scholastic philosophy in which Tempels was brought up. Similar problems haunt a large number of text on African culture, personality of Philosophy.

It is interesting to observe that where empirical grounding is taken seriously, such as by the philosophers Henry Odera Oruka, Kwame Gyekye and Barry Hallen who engage in interviewing sages or analysing proverbs and other linguistic forms, very interesting insights are presented. Typically, such studies concern specific African cultures. The generalisation to Africa as a whole (South of the Sahara or 'Negro' Africa) is not automatically assumed but is something that has to be argued for separately.<sup>12</sup>

There is also an awkward problem with any claim to identify something specifically African, a problem that has received almost no attention. If one claims that some characteristic is typically African, then one needs not only confirmation that Africans conform to this characteristic, but also that non-African do not. This second claim is even more difficult to prove than the first. In this context, it is relevant to study similar intellectual movements in other parts of the world. Gavin Kitching alerted to parallels between African discussions and those of the Slavophiles in Russia in the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> The Slavophiles formulated a Slavic alternative to western capitalist society drawing inspiration from indigenous social and cultural forms.

Empirical grounding is not necessarily of great relevance, however. For academic studies it is, but for political ideologies or statements that aim at mobilisation for cultural renewal or cultural self-consciousness it is not. Many statements of African Renaissance, Consciencism or Ubuntu philosophy may, after all, be more of the second type. Even the rhetorical structure of many texts seems to suggest such a reading. They spend rather little effort in spelling out the empirical nature of African life-forms, but concentrate upon indicating the sharp differences between the claimed African philosophy, personality or culture from the European model that serves as its 'other'. The line of reasoning is more a logical exercise of inversion than an empirical one of corroboration.<sup>14</sup>

### *The politics of African Renaissance*

A second set of classical problems with culturalist constructions of an African culture or of a "national culture and identity" concerns politics. At a quite banal political level, one can observe that the best known statements of national culture and identity have served as an ideological instrument of African elite politics. If we take the examples of Consciencism, Zambian Humanism, and Ujamaa, they are, with hindsight, designs at the top-level of society hardly even resonating among the

people whose philosophy is supposed to be characterised by the president-philosophers. The life-time of the philosophy has generally not been longer than that of the period in power of the national leader: the Osagyefo (redeemer), the Mwalimo (teacher), or the 'father of the nation'. From a political point of view, the ideas functioned as classical examples of new elite ideologies, a smoke-screen of attractive words that could cover an actual practice that conforms alarmingly well to the logic sketched magnificently by Frantz Fanon already in 1956 in the essay "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness."<sup>15</sup> There are also striking similarities in the ways in which these national philosophies or African philosophies were launched. Typically a few years after taking power, seemingly as a response to some disappointments about the results achieved by the new government, and part of a radicalisation in the fields of ideology, of Africanisation, limitation of opposition and, in the 1960s, also nationalisation of parts of the economy. Typically, the leadership set up an ideological institute, funded separately from the universities, to further develop and propagate the ideas; Nkrumah set up the Winneba Institute, Kaunda the Institute for Humanism. In South Africa, an African Renaissance Institute has been set up.

A more fundamental political issue related to declarations of national or African culture and identity is the question of spokespersonship. Who speaks? On behalf of whom? With what right? Who is excluded? The self-appointed role of spokesman of their culture, which the president-philosophers assumed, always excludes those who do not fit the proclaimed cultural identity. Zambian national culture, for instance was defined as fundamentally religious by president Kaunda. This made my colleague Roni Bwalya in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Zambia exclaim: "sorry, I am honest when I say that I am not a believer, should I therefore conclude that I cannot be a true Zambian?" One can contest the wisdom and even the legitimacy of trying at all to proclaim a national or continental cultural identity.

### *The Eurocentric hyperbole*

A third field of classical problems related to culturalist thought, in the form of ethnophilosophy, nativism or Afrocentrism, has been highlighted with great sophistication by contemporary African philosophers such as Paulin Hountondji, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Valentin Mudimbe. They show that exactly by trying to depict Africans and African cultures as non-European, culturalists replicate very European conceptual oppositions (such as between Europe and Africa, between white and black, between primitive and modern, reason and emotion or intuition) and even tend to replicate part of the racist imagery of the exotic and the African

that was developed within the romantic tradition in Europe. As Appiah states, it is “a reverse discourse: the terms of resistance are already given to us, and our contestation entrapped within the Western cultural conjuncture we affect to dispute;” (188) “few things are less native than nativism.” In the article "Europe Upside Down: Fallacies of the New Afrocentrism" he also points out the dramatic simplifications that are often presented as African culture. The concept of "ntu" (universal force) as the stem of muntu (man), mantu (person), kintu (thing) that is given a central place in characterising African culture in the well-known book of Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: African Cultures and the Western World* is a case in point. Imagine the reverse, Appiah suggests, that someone comes to Europe and identifies the concept of "thing" with the stem "-ing" as the core of Western culture.

### *Practice*

A final domain of classical problems surrounding culturalist statements of African culture concerns problems of practice and implementation. Even if the image of African culture can be correct, politically unsuspected and avoiding the logic of oppositional stereotyping, what useful practical strategies follow from it? The idea of "working from African cultural roots" contains promises of appropriateness to African societies, of mobilising creative forces from African actors, connecting naturally to peoples lifestyles and understanding, even of leading to more humane and less exploitative social conditions. The development strategies that it suggests will be "African and therefore appropriate." When it comes to practice, however, the specifically 'African' perspective provides far less tools for action than was hoped for. The idea of an African type of democracy around the idea of consensus, for instance, remains a general idea, not elaborated to the level where institutional frameworks, political rules and the resolution of practical dilemma's related to the idea are tackled. On the one hand, the relative vagueness, when it comes to the practicalities of the African alternatives, leaves ample space for the political elite to bend the interpretation of what is African to their own needs, as the introduction of the single party system in the 1960s has shown. On the other hand, the experiences of several countries that tried to act upon the African alternatives, such as Tanzania and Zambia, prove that good intentions and attractive ideas can easily result in far from attractive, even vicious, practice on the ground. The record of Afrocentric politics is so disappointing that there is quite a burden of proof on the shoulders of those who want to revive such politics today.



*Conclusion: Beyond Culturalism*

Key debates within African intellectual history can alert us to the classical pitfalls of discourses on African culture. However, this history also provides very inspiring examples. One can think here of empirically well-grounded studies, from John Mensah Sarbah's studies in the 1890s and J.B. Danquah's in the 1920s in African legal and constitutional traditions, to serious contemporary studies in Anthropology and Philosophy.<sup>16</sup> A special and interesting case is also the Guinean revolutionary leader Amilcar Cabral. His famous lectures "National Liberation and Culture" (1970) and "The weapon of Theory" (1966) belong to the most thoughtful and impressive twentieth century texts in African thought.<sup>17</sup> The issue of culture is raised here not for its own sake, but as a force in the liberation struggle. Culture is then the basic force from which the liberation struggle evolves, at the same time, however, the struggle is a cultural project itself, the struggle involves a cultural revolution. In Cabral's view the national framework was central here, thus he perceived the cultural revolution to be the transformation of various cultural resources into a national culture. The aim of the liberation struggle, summarised in his seminal phrase of "mastering our own historicity", is a self-reliant development, not only in the economic and political spheres but also in culture.

Returning to African Renaissance and Ubuntu, the lessons from African intellectual history that this essay suggests are on the one hand political in nature and on the other hand intellectual. Politically, the pitfalls are those of identity politics. Expositions of culture can be strong instrument of national politics and of self-assertion of (minority) communities. The crucial question here is how open and democratic this national or community politics is. Do the statements of culture and identity derive from a self-appointed political spokesman, or do they derive from a lively, open and pluralistic cultural process? Intellectually, the pitfalls are those of culturalism. The culturalist mode of discussing cultural issues has been identified above from an analysis of Blyden's ideas. Culturalism, in this view, involves the combination of an essentialist idea of cultures (culture conceived of as a kind of 'body' or 'entity' held together by a strong internal coherence of even a core or essence) and the view that persons always 'belong' to a culture, that a person should be anchored in a culture, that the cultural framework is a condition for being authentic. The classical pitfalls that emerged in historical debates in Africa and that were discussed in the previous section all relate to this culturalist model of thought. It can be noted that Cabral's view of culture involves neither of the two assumptions of culturalism. Cabral can here, as in other matters, be the best guide for the activists of African Renaissance and Ubuntu philosophy.

## Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> Quotes, respectively from Blyden, "Africa and the Africans", quoted from G.A. Mosley, ed., *African Philosophy: Selected readings* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1995), p.24; the speech "Race and Study" held in Sierra Leone in 1895, printed in Lynch, *Edward Wilmot Blyden*, chapter 4; the opening speech of the Liberia College in 1881 "The Aims and Methods of Liberal Education for Africans", printed in Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, pp.71-93.
- <sup>2</sup> J.E. Casely Hayford, *Ethiopia Unbound. Studies in Race Emancipation* (1911; reprint, London: Frank Cass, 1969), p. 160.
- <sup>3</sup> K.C. Anyanwu, "African Political Doctrine", in O.E.A. Ruch & K.C. Anyanwu, *African Philosophy* (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1984), p. 374
- <sup>4</sup> S. Biko, *I write what I like*. A selection of writings edited by Aelred Stubbs, C.R (1978; reprint London: Heinemann, 1979), p. 92
- <sup>5</sup> M.W. Makgoba, T. Shope, T. Mazwai, "Introduction", in M.W. Makgoba, *African Renaissance* (Sandton: Mafube; Cape Town: Tafelberg; 1999), p. iv
- <sup>6</sup> The full argument to show that one can speak in African intellectual history of the last one and a half centuries of a family of discourses that are concerned with African identity is contained in my book *Political Discourses in African Thought: 1860 to the Present* (Westport: Praeger/Greenwood, 1999).
- <sup>7</sup> See his *From West Africa to Palestine*. Freetown, Manchester, London, 1873.
- <sup>8</sup> "The so-called Christian public are not yet prepared for such a catastrophe to their enterprise, which nevertheless, so far as Africa is concerned is hopeless". Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, 120.
- <sup>9</sup> Lynch, *Black Spokesman*, 207. From a letter to Booker T. Washington, of November 18, 1894.
- <sup>10</sup> See e.g. Lynch, *Edward Wilmot Blyden*, chapter 4 and p. 200-210, and Blyden's letters published in Lynch, *Selected Letters of Edward Wilmot Blyden*, as well as my discussion pp. 49-53 in P. Boele van Hensbroek, *Political Discourses in African Thought*.
- <sup>11</sup> For an elaborate version of this analysis of culturalism, see my *Political Discourses in African Thought*, pp. 149-153.
- <sup>12</sup> Kwame Gyekye states, though rather vague and not very convincingly, that there are "sufficient commonalities in many areas of the cultures of the African people to make interminable disputes over the use of the term "African" unnecessary and unrewarding". In Kwame Gyekye: *African Cultural Values. An Introduction*. (Philadelphia, Pa/Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996. p. xiii-xiv).
- <sup>13</sup> G. Kitching, *Development and Underdevelopment in Historical Perspective: Populism, Nationalism and Industrialisation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1982). On Slavophile thought, see for instance Andrej Walicki, *The Slavophile controversy: history of a conservative Utopia in nineteenth-century Russian Thought*.(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.)
- <sup>14</sup> See for instance K.C. Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought", in R.A. Wright, *African Philosophy. An Introduction* (Lanham, New York, London: University of America Press). In the same collection there is an article of Kwame Gyekye on personhood that is much more concerned with empirical substantiation.
- <sup>15</sup> English version in *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondworth: Penguin, 1967).
- <sup>16</sup> J. Mensay Sarbah, *Fanti Customary Law* (London: Frank Cass, 1968; reprinted from 1897);

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J.B. Danquah, *Gold Coast: Akan Laws and Customs and the Akim Abuakwa Constitution* (London: Routledge, 1928).

- <sup>17</sup> “National Liberation and Culture” is the Mondlane Memorial Lecture, held at Syracuse University in 1970; “The weapon of Theory. Presuppositions and objectives of national liberation in relation to social structure” was held at the First Solidarity Conference of the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America, held in Havana in 1966. Both are reprinted in A. Cabral, *Unity and Struggle. Speeches and Writings* (London, Heinemann, 1980).

## REVIEW

Leonhard Praeg, *African Philosophy and the Quest for Autonomy: A Philosophical Investigation*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000. Pp. xxxi + 322.

By Lansana Keita

Leonhard Praeg's *African Philosophy and the Quest for Autonomy* constitutes an attempt to discuss the function of African philosophy in the post-colonial era to redefine or represent Africa free of the distortions imposed on the idea of Africa before and during the colonial era. Praeg's question is this: can this attempt at re-presentation in the form of the transcendental question "What is African philosophy?" yield an autonomous African philosophy? Intellectual attempts at this *re-presentation* (Praeg's term) of Africa from African perspectives in recent times have sought to instantiate this effort in terms of notions such as "African Renaissance" out of which the idea of *ubuntu* or "African humanism" in the sense of "I am because we are," could be derived.

Praeg would argue, however, that attempts at establishing an autonomous African philosophy by way of ethnophilosophical formulation are doomed to failure. In Praeg's own formulations we have: 1) "Ethnophilosophical texts are widely recognized as some of the earliest attempts to present us with an African philosophy. Senghor's *negritude* and Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* are often considered as classics"(135). 2) "Ethnophilosophy represents an historical *intervention* in the discourse *on* Africa. At the same time it undertook the process of *re-invention* it also situated this attempt in the context of a meta-narrative of oppression and liberation conceived of in terms of re-established individuality and autonomy"(135). 3) "If we admit, as I think we should, to the fundamental undecidability[political, epistemological, and representational] of the debate on African philosophy then we admit, too, that there is no answer. That we have been deluded by the *re-* and the *de-* into thinking that there is an a final liberation at which will know *what it is*; the point at which, finally, knowledge about Africa will once again coincide with itself; a point at which it will be possible to enter 'the beyond'"(213).

On account of the undecidability concerning the question of African philosophy Praeg seeks to encourage African philosophy to focus more on the question "Where does African philosophy speak from?" (the ethical question) than exclusively on

“What is African philosophy?”(the epistemological question). As Praeg puts it: “This ethical dimension, this respect for the *other* demands that in addition to the transcendental question ‘What is African philosophy?’ we also ask the ethical question ‘Where is African philosophy?’, ‘Where do we situate it?’, and ‘why do we ask the question ‘What is African philosophy?’”(218).

This epistemological shift allows Praeg to introduce the idea of *ubuntu* defined as an African communitarian humanism(“I am because we are”) as central to the tasks of African philosophy. Praeg explores this ethical role for African philosophy in his final chapter “Truth and Reconciliation: a Social Contract.” In this chapter Praeg attempts to apply the concept of *ubuntu* to the Truth and Reconciliation public exercise in post-Apartheid South Africa.. I mentioned above that one of the several post-colonial discourses has been that of an “African Renaissance” as a way of seeking a reconfiguration of the idea of Africa. For Praeg this African Renaissance should be understood principally in terms consistent with the idea of an expanded *ubuntu*. Praeg writes: “In as much as Renaissance signifies a rebirth through return, it is a return or remembrance of those values that may perhaps contribute to the formulation of a truly African identity’(108).

Yet there are problems with Praeg’s interesting formulations. His implicit assumption is that African philosophy as discourse is faced with a dilemma: on the one hand African philosophy as ethnophilosophy is undecidable and on the other as modernist philosophy a la Hountondji and Towa is self-defeating (212-213). One senses further that Praeg reserves for African philosophy the essentially ethical task of serving as the foundations for a post-Apartheid social harmony. Implicit in his metaphorical point of departure for his treatise is the idea that claim of an African “disfigurement” as the result of colonialism is rendered moot on the grounds of the lack of evidence. Praeg expresses this as “ absence of *corpus delecti*”(viii-xxi, 301-308, *et pasim*). This probably explains his decision to begin his discourse with an analysis of the concept of the “social contract” with regard to Thomas Hobbes’s treatment of such in the *Leviathan*.

Praeg’s subtext here is as follows: the idea of an African Renaissance in terms of a re-presentation of the idea of Africa is a risky undertaking on the grounds that outside the imposed structures of colonialism African attempts at reconfiguration for purposes of autonomy by way of “return” to a supposedly precolonial world would be to risk embracing some form of a Hobbesian “state of nature”. But this is exactly what Eurocentric colonial discourse claimed as it sought to invent a workable definition of Africa for its own purposes. But Praeg’s interpretation of the idea of African Renaissance limits itself mainly to issue of how to implement the

idea of *ubuntu* as specifically African. But this cannot withstand anthropological scrutiny. Communitarian humanism with its regard for the other is not uniquely African given empirical evidence of its practice by Native Americans, Asians, and Pacific Islanders on first encounters with the European other. Furthermore, the general idea of “African Renaissance” should not limit itself in the African context to just a set ethical practices--- when one examines how and why the term “Renaissance” was first coined and applied.

The idea of “African Renaissance” in the case of Africa, it would seem, is merely an attempt at both normalization and a positive exceptionalism of Africa in world history. The term justifiably acquires meaningful content with recognition of the following confirmable facts. 1) Africa was the exclusive centre of world humanity for at least seventy percent of the time that *homo sapiens* existed on earth. The technological inventions necessary for the survival and advancement of humankind were nurtured and maintained for several thousands of years in Africa’s environments uniquely. 2) With the recognition that the crucial biological *differential* that separates humans from other biological organisms is the creative and abstractive capacities of the human brain one must note that the crucial first steps in human cultural and technological development all resulted from *independent* African initiative. One might consider examples of such: a) human language, b) writing, c) quantitative reasoning, d) protoscientific and scientific thought and activity, e) engineering, f) construction in stone, g) protomedical activity, etc.

After the foundations of human culture and civilization were established in Africa its subsequent seminal ideas exercised great impact on that continent’s hinterlands. Consider the examples of monotheism, crucial for the establishment of the three well-known monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), the holistic metaphysics of Plotinus (a native Egyptian) and his intellectual North African descendant, Augustine. Without the ideas of these two thinkers theology might well have had a different configuration in Europe. One might also note that the intellectual centres of medieval Africa at Timbuktu (noted for scholars like Ahmed Baba) were an integral part of the intellectual conveyer belt that transported Graeco-Egyptian thought and concepts to Europe proper. North African born Ibn Khaldun is a well-known scholar in this regard. Africa provided the bridge for the intellectual transplants from the Graeco-Egyptian world to be presented to Europe in the form of the patently invented idea of an European Renaissance. A realist historian of ideas could more accurately describe the European Renaissance as the “European Assimilation” given how this phenomenon was actually engendered.

Recall that for the Greeks the peoples north and west of Greece were contemptuously dismissed as barbarians who shared no cultural commonalities with Greeks.

This is the idea implicit in the notion of “African Renaissance” : a normative appeal to Africa to seek to regain the significant position in human history that it occupied for most of the existence of *homo sapiens*. The invented “disfigurement” imposed on Africa during the last five hundred years is the source of the theoretical template that serves as the basis for the claimed and effected marginality of Africa in contemporary global affairs. The contingencies of human history have produced different civilizations with different phenomenologies. The basis for the idea for an African Renaissance may be found within this context. I am inclined to believe that those who argue for an African Renaissance have in mind a restoration of Africa’s historically documented aesthetic and technological creativity. One might contrast this with Europe’s historical skill at pragmatic, controlled, and effective assimilation of non-indigenous ideas whether in scientific thinking, metaphysics(as in religion and theology), and the aesthetic arts.

One of the central ideas in Praeg’s analysis is that the search for an autonomous and pristine pre-colonial African self culminating in “the recovery of a lost but *autonomous* body of thought” (303) was doomed to failure because there was no real evidence of such and that the search would be necessarily compromised because of the dyadic difficulty of separating the pre-colonial self from the post-colonial self. But the analysis above presents us with a surprising paradox: *for seventy percent of human history the African self was autonomous, and much more so than the European or Asian self. And the demands of the European other for proof of autonomy are indeed ironic when that self has always preferred an assimilationist pragmatism over cultural autonomy. Yet no demands are ever made for the European other to produce an authentic and autonomous body of European knowledge. No real attempts have been made to recover the relatively autonomous ethnophilosophies of the Gauls, Celts, Vandals, and Visigoths. Their belief systems developed over a period of at least forty thousand years were summarily jettisoned first for the transcribed rituals, beliefs and proscriptions of a Hebrew folklore of West Asian provenance then for the transplanted modes of thought and ontologies of Graeco-Egyptian provenance.* It is a surprising paradox that Africa can answer positively the autonomy question but Europe cannot.

Leonhard Praeg’s text is a useful one in that it boldly raises the question of the intellectual history of Africa and examines the epistemological tensions generated in attempting to answer that question. His creative though problematic claims about

Africa's intellectual past and possible futures by way of concepts such as "African Renaissance" and *ubuntu* are no doubt grist for contemporary epistemological mills. But what of the contemporary question about African philosophy and autonomy? Autonomy in African philosophy would be no more nor less than that of, say, contemporary Continental European philosophy or Anglo-American philosophy. Thus autonomy in African philosophy would arise only when there are established schools and paradigms of such at African universities and research centres.





## **Comprehensive Bibliography on African Renaissance and Ubuntu**

This bibliography is meant to be a practical tool for further study. It includes titles of books, academic articles, conference reports, PhD and Masters theses and magazine articles. The bibliography concerns primarily sources related to South Africa. A comprehensive bibliography would need to include publications resulting from related discourses in other African countries and America, as well as historical works. In order to hint at these contexts of use of the concept of African renaissance, the present bibliography includes scattered references of this kind, such as Molete Kofi Asante from the USA, references from Nigeria, as well as historical titles such as Cheikh Anta Diop, Rosy Pool, and Davidson Nicol.

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