

## AN EXAMINATION OF AFRICAN HUMANISM AND SPIRITUALITY AS PRELUDE TO THE *UBUNTU* ONTOLOGY

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### Abstract

This study examines African humanism and spirituality as prelude to the *ubuntu* ontology. Humanism has been popularly acclaimed as an intricate nature of traditional African societies. Interwoven with this humanism is the African spirituality which permeated the entire African life. Sadly, it has been discovered over the past few years that the community spirit has declined amongst most Africans. This has led to an exponential increase in individualism, lack of love and hospitality, incessant conflicts and loss of hope. This is practically against the spirit of humanism that pervaded traditional African society. This necessarily begs the question: How must Africa and Africans respond to this situation? This is the problem that this study investigates using the *ubuntu* concept as a paradigm. The study employed the qualitative research design, with data gathered from secondary sources. The evaluative method was used to analyse the data. The basic finding is that African Humanism which had the welfare or wellbeing of the human person as its key attribute has drastically waned, leading to various forms of human abuses. The study surmises that unless the human person is seen as the center of the universe and the entire creation as being there to serve human purpose, as naturally engraved in traditional African humanism and enunciated by the *ubuntu* ontology, the challenges of inhumanity and injustice in Africa may not be surmounted.

**Key Words:** *Ubuntu, Africa, Humanism, Spirituality, Ontology*

### Introduction/Background

The African traditional setting has always been known to promote unity, togetherness, brotherliness and cooperation which are considered vital elements for the survival of the community. In other words, the traditional African society was pervaded by a high sense of humanism (communalism). Within this ambience, individuals participated in a communal ownership of livelihood. There was, as Doyle observes, “a strong identity with and devotion to the interest of one’s own minority or ethnic group based on the assumption of common identity – belief that people belong to specific groups, sharing history, language, culture and historic space” (72). In the same vein, Ehusani maintains that “African humanism and communalism thrives based on the realization that Communities are fundamental to connecting people with related interests so that they can share with one another, innovate, use and re-use each other's ideas, collaborate, and learn together” (63). Harned buttresses this assertion with the popular African saying: “Go the way that many people go; if you go alone, you will have reason to lament” (31). Therefore, the authentic African is known and identified in, by and through his/her humanism, depicted by the community spirit.

Life in the traditional African community was based on the philosophy of live-and-let-live. Mbiti describes this kind of living among an African people as "...a way of life emphatically centred upon human interests and values; a mode of living evidently characterized by empathy, and by consideration and compassion for human beings" (102). Hence, in an African community, everyone is accommodated. This African sense of accommodation accounts for why, "In traditional African culture, the weak and the aged; the incurable, the helpless, the sick were affectionately taken care of in the comforting family atmosphere" (Daryll 88). And as Ruch and Anyanwu point out, in this experience "the other is another self. The I is lost in the You; the You and the I is lost in the We" (79). In this atmosphere, they are constrained by genuine love; solidarity and common good and are further motivated by the resulting sense of true identity, duty and right or justice. Under African humanism, people do not think of themselves as isolated individuals, but rather understand themselves as part of a community. The "We" relationship takes pre-eminence over the "I".

Within the African humanistic ambience, there was a general sense of hospitality. Neighbours were always welcome and accommodated. There were various symbolic ways of expressing welcome and acceptance. These are in forms of presentation of kola nuts, traditional gin, drinkable water, coconuts, handshakes, etc; among various communities. These are given to a visitor to show that he/she is welcome and safe. Okafor has summarized the African humanistic attitude to strangers thus: "In traditional African culture, whenever there is food to be taken everyone present is invited to participate even if the food was prepared for far less number of people; it is not in the manner of Africans to eat anything however small, without sharing it with anyone else present, or at least expressing the intention to do so" (71). Mbiti supports this view with his popular inversion, "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am". By this maxim, the individual owes his/her existence to other members of the society. He is "simply part of the whole... whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: I am because we are; and since we are there I am" (92).

It is against this background that Desmond Tutu formulated his *Ubuntu* philosophy. The *ubuntu* could be summed up in Tutu's own words: "A person is a person through other persons. None of us comes into the world fully formed. We would not know how to think, or walk, or speak, or behave as human beings unless we learned it from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human" (25). In other words, the *Ubuntu* philosophy projects the humanism of the African culture in which the individual expresses concern, sympathy, reciprocity, kindness, respect, mutual coexistence and a general sense of humanism geared towards building just and equitable communities.

The *Ubuntu* concept has various and rich meanings expressing the values of humanity and positive social living together in the community. It brings out the element of seeking unity against divisions in the community. As it has historically been defined, "the concept of *Ubuntu* expresses the cardinal values of love, compassion, forgiveness, forgetting oneself, and Charity" (Claire 84). These expressions of the *ubuntu* have a close relationship with traditional African humanism and spirituality, which need to be rebirthed today through a communal reawakening.

### **Conceptualizing *Ubuntu***

The word *Ubuntu* belongs to the Zulu and Xhosa languages of Africa. The word loosely translates to the practice of humanism – humanity shown to others. Provisionally defined, it is an "embodiment of all the virtues that bring about harmony and the spirit of sharing among the members of a society" (Bhengu 7). It is an African traditional belief that constantly creates awareness in the fact that an

individual's actions today are a reflection on the past, and will have far-reaching consequences for the future of both the individual and the entire society. Matshe asserts beautifully that "one aspect of *ubuntu* is that, at all times, the individual effectively represents the people from among whom he or she comes, and therefore tries to behave according to the highest standards and exhibit the virtues upheld by his or her society". Such a person understands her place in the social system and is consequently able to interact with other individuals in a graceful manner. *Ubuntu* is embedded in the African spirit of humanism and has an admixture of social, ethical and spiritual values, among which are: "respect for others, helpfulness, community, sharing, caring, trust and unselfishness" (Shutte 113). In its true form, *Ubuntu* places utmost priority on the well-being of the entire community irrespective of any differences that may exist. This is why Boele reports that "the concept of *ubuntu* was adapted in the 1990s as an ideology by post-apartheid South Africa, as a vehicle to bring about harmony and cooperation among its many racial and ethnic groups" (49).

The Zulu maxim "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" practically encapsulates the *ubuntu* philosophy. This maxim means "a person is (becomes) a person through other persons". The Archbishop Desmond Tutu captures *ubuntu* in the most fitting words:

*Ubuntu* is very difficult to render into a Western language. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, 'Yu u nobuntu'; 'Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*.' Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours.' ...We say, 'A person is a person through other persons.' ...A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed. ...To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. What dehumanizes you inexorably dehumanizes me (12).

Writing on the various values of *ubuntu*, Samkange, Thomson and Sankange emphasized three maxims which are maxims of *Ubuntu*:

To be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish respectful human relations with them.... 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... The king owes his status, including all the powers associated with it, to the will of the people under him. He therefore ought to use his office for the wellbeing of the people (71).

This means that the authors saw sharing as just one of many virtues encouraged by the philosophy of *ubuntu*. Ethically, the spirit of *ubuntu* prescribes that visitors be provided for and protected in every home and society they enter. By this, visitors are supposed to be made comfortable through provision of food, water and accommodation. Visitors who stayed longer were even provided with farmlands and lands to build their huts. Nelson Mandela painted the same picture of the *ubuntu* in the following words:

A traveler through a country would stop at a village and he didn't have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him. That is one aspect of *Ubuntu* but it will have various aspects. *Ubuntu* does not mean that people should not address themselves. The question therefore is: Are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you be able to improve?

In the *ubuntu* scheme, the “we” supersedes the “I”. The identity of an individual is thus replaced by the identity of the larger society. In this context, individuals are representatives of their families, villages, districts, provinces and regions. And in turn, when anything affected the individual, it affects the whole family and village. By this, the individual is required to positively represent her social system by being of best behaviour and maintaining the highest possible standards of the virtues upheld by his or her society.

Under *ubuntu*, children are treasured and their upbringing belongs to the entire society. The roles of mother and father are not performed by only the biological parents of the child, but by every adult member of the society. This lends credence to the popular saying among Africans that ‘it takes the whole village to raise a child’. African values, ethics and spiritual development of a person are intertwined and internalized as a way of life. This interprets that each person is expected to be in relation with other members of the community. Integral to shaping these societal values, instilling the right ethics and forming the spiritual life of children, any adult could acceptably discipline any child who is found derailing. This spirit of society in Africa was emphasized by Mbiti when he averred that: “An individual does not exist alone except corporately” (109). In the same manner, in traditional African *ubuntu* setting, a crime committed by an individual had far-reaching consequences than just for the individual concerned. The consequences extend far beyond the individual to her people – the entire community. In essence, *Ubuntu* implies a constant awareness that life is a continuum. The actions of an individual today could be interpreted from the past, and has effects and consequences for the future. With a proper *ubuntu* in one’s life time, death becomes only a transition, since it brings about a unity with those gone beyond to become ancestors and those who would come hereafter. This is why *Ubuntu* defines the individual basically in terms of her relationships with other members of the community.

### **African Humanism as A Prelude To *Ubuntu***

African Humanism like any of the other forms of humanism has the welfare or wellbeing of the human person as its key attribute. The human person is seen as the center of the universe and the entire creation is seen as being there to serve human purpose, whether it is to good ends or evil. This idea of the human person as the center-piece of creation is buttressed by Mbiti when he observed that, “it is as if the whole world exists for the sake of mankind” (38). This shows thereby that African people look for the usefulness or otherwise of the universe in relation to humanity. It has to do with both what the world can do for the human person and how he/she can use the world for his/her own good.

Closely linked to this humanistic spirit of the African is what many scholars term African communalism. For Gyekye, “communalism is the doctrine that the communality (or group) is the focus of activities of the individual member of the society” (36). What that entails is that in communal setting, individuals that constitute the socio-political environment and working relationships are involved. In support of that view, Aborisade defines communalism as “a strong allegiance to one’s own ethnic group, commonly based on sharing history and cultures, characterized by collective cooperation and ownership by members of a community”. Here, basic constitutive elements are spelt out, which grease the hub of communalism. These are cultural history and values that enhance collective cooperation that make the given culture peculiar. Here, membership of the group is strictly determined by the criteria that define the community and afford members rights and loyalty.

It is within the above context that Ikuenobe conceptualizes communalism as “both an African conceptual framework and a set of cultural practices that prioritize the role and function of the collective group over the individual in a worldwide context” (329). Aborisade agrees with this view, when he argued that “communalism in Africa is a system that is both supersensible and material in its terms of

reference. Both are found in a society that is believed by the Africans to be originally god-made because it transcends the people who live in it now and it is man-made because it cannot be culturally understood independent of those who live in it". Aborisade avers that the Africans emphasize community life and communalism as a living principle of which the basic ideology is community-identity. Their aims therefore are to produce and present an individual as a community and a culture bearer. African communalism as seen above, presumes pluralism in that it is essentially a voluntary pooling together of independent and differing efforts and capabilities that makes the African communal life what it is. Thus, in this system, the young are not ontologically less human than the elders.

It is the view of Sogolo that African communalism, borne out of African humanism, is "the social structure which pervades traditional Africa in which every member voluntarily cooperates" (72). In trying to place the origin of this lifestyle in Africa, Sogolo argued in his discussion on the role of traditional education that epistemological authoritarianism was rampant in traditional Africa precisely because the elders were the only ones held to have all knowledge and wisdom, so that what they said had to be believed without questioning. This is why according to Abanuka, "in the system of the community's teaching and learning, the child must learn to know things in relation to what the community wants, being that relatedness is the hallmark of knowledge at this level" (73). The point here is that communal knowledge,

...whose subject is still the individual takes its rise from the needs of the common life in the community and its end is the preservation of the community's life and heritage or laws, customs and traditions".... Here, the individual cannot form concepts in whatever way he likes. Rather. Concepts are meaningful within the experience of the community (75).

It is under this wide cycle of African humanism that Abanuka also conceptualized his notion of holosism. Holosism tries to establish a metaphysical conception of the world as one entity with diverse parts that are interwoven and interrelated. The wellbeing or self actualization of the individual parts contributes to the general fulfillment of the nature and goal of reality. It upholds unity in diversity. The theory of Holosism maintains that reality as a whole is not just aggregate of all the particular things, which exist or can be conceived. "The whole is not equated with the sum total of the parts. Rather reality as a whole is the totality of the things that exist or can be conceived and their ultimate origin and support" (35).

It is within this African humanistic scenario that *ubuntu* emanated. Ruch and Anyanwu corroborate this by stating that "communalism in the African community spirit was epitomized in such contexts as *ubuntu* and *ujamaa*, among others" (83). This implies that there is a high estimation of the community in African thought and practice, higher than that of the individual, but not at the cost of forgetting the individual person. This is so because a person is a person in the community and through the others of his or her community. This makes a culture most important especially in granting mutual help, caring for each other and sharing with each other by means of dialogues.

#### *African Spirituality and The Ubuntu*

The *ubuntu* maxim has a profoundly spiritocentric dimension in the African worldview. The definition of "Persons" in the African spiritual setting includes both living human beings and ancestors who have already died and by extension, children who would be born to the society in subsequent times. Indicatively, *Ubuntu* is interested in the harmonious existence of all life-thread of individuals on earth. It gives adequate consideration to ancestors who have gone to the world beyond death and also those who

will come to the world in future. This is borne out of the fact that “every individual is the fruit of his or her ancestors, and will become the ancestor of all future descendants” (Broodryk 85).

Africans have a holistic conception of Spirituality cutting across all their domains of operation. Humanity is best conceived as a life-force interacting harmoniously with forces in the universe namely: God(s), the deities, the founding ancestors of different clans, the ancestors and other living/dead of the family and tribe. Mbiti paints the picture even more appropriately. He states:

It is religion more than anything else, which colours the (Africans) understanding of the universe and their empirical participation in that universe, making life a profound religious phenomenon. To be is to be religious in a religious universe. That is the philosophical understanding, belief, African myths, customs, traditions, beliefs, moral, actions and social relationships (262).

Africans spirituality has impacts on the entirety of individual and collective life. This form of spirituality is that which transcends the individual to various societal expressions: socially, economically, politically and otherwise. In essence, it has a web that affects the entire society. This is why Mageza observes rightly that, “African spirituality is identified as reflecting the wholeness of life and is important in harmonizing life in all its fullness” (114). In short, African spirituality has to do with the societal building and the integrity of creation. In that life, everyone is involved in rebuilding spirituality in the lives of others – ancestors are also involved in this process. Uduigwomen states it aptly in the following words: “African spirituality impacts on the totality of life, it is non-dualistic, it does not posit a bifurcation between the secular and the sacred. It encompasses the entire life of faith, which includes body, mind, (and soul) as well as the social and political dimensions” (62).

The concept of body, mind and soul also includes issues of ecology. This issue is an important part of life, especially in the way Africans relate to nature. The above highlights the concept of spirituality which is ecological, manifesting sensitivity towards and solidarity with the earth. Africans regard Mother Nature not as an object of subjugation, but as a mother and symbol of the divine. This is why traditional Africans would not cut a tree without certain rituals. People were connected to nature. The connection with the whole of nature was therefore important, nurturing it instead of dominating it. Life in an African village is connected to the entire God-created part of life. In other words, Africans are connected to God as much as creation is part of God.

Otonko agrees with the above by asserting that, “Africans eat religiously, dance religiously, trade religiously and organize their societies religiously; but this is done in a holistic manner, without any dichotomy of the material and the spiritual” (82). This is because Africans believe that if a person lived a good life while on earth, upon death that person becomes a good ancestor. As an ancestor, he or she is able to connect one to higher powers. In other words, that person is believed to be in a better place than the physical universe (akin to the Christian idea of heaven). Such ancestors become intermediaries between the living and the divine, since ordinary human beings cannot speak to God directly due to his transcendence

It is typical of Africans to speak through a mediator when approaching someone who is not their equal. Ancestors therefore play the part of these spiritual mediators. This is aptly described by Mbiti: “The African view of the universe or the world, understand Spiritual mediators as people who fill up the area between man (sic) and God” (76). Ikenga-Metuh beautifully articulated it when he averred that “in African worldviews, there is no clear line of demarcation between the material and the spiritual realms” (164). Both of the realms are so interwoven so much so that the human person forms the bridge, so to speak, between the two realms. It is from this role which he/she plays that “the central positioning is

derivable and the mission of his/her life is inextricably defined” (167). God is regarded not just as the originator, creator or sustainer of the universe and especially the father of the human person, He is more so, regarded as the source of every individual person’s life.

In Africa, death does not bring human existence to an end, but rather changes its status. Notably, Africans do not hold that everybody becomes an ancestor in the true sense of the word. Those who lived bad lives can never be considered as ancestors when they die. Only those who live out as models by exhibiting the right values become ancestors in death. Olupona states this clearly:

It is important to note that not all dead people automatically attain the status of ancestor ship. Death is not always a requirement for it. The notion of ancestor ship implies the idea of selection, before any other consideration to a social model based on the idea of exemplification in the strictest sense of the word...the good elder becomes an image of God when he (sic) dies (11).

From the above, it could be gleaned an ancestor is one who must have reached a considerable age and maturity in life, with a wealth of positive experience which he shares with the younger generation. Apart from other expectations, a good elder who would subsequently become an ancestor, lives and dies in conformity with the norms and rules of the village or society. This idea of African spirituality demonstrates beautifully why Christianity appealed to the African spiritual mentality, especially when introducing Christianity and the concept of Jesus as mediator. Their regard for mediation and the place of hierarchy must have contributed immensely in connecting them to the place of Jesus as mediator between God and man.

### **Conclusion**

The decline in African humanism, which has become increasingly glaring, is largely responsible for the unhealthy individualism, greed, bereavement of love and increasing conflicts all leading to the wanton destruction of lives and properties in Africa today. It is in realization of this that the *ubuntu* ontology has variously been projected as one of the best platforms to reignite African humanism. The *Ubuntu* ontology, which is a derivative of traditional African humanism and spirituality, is capable of promoting the rich values of humanity and positive social living together in contemporary African society. This is because it projects the idea and the importance of working together for peaceful human relations in society. It also brings out the element of seeking unity against divisions in the community. In addition, since the concept of *Ubuntu* “expresses the cardinal values of love, compassion, forgiveness, forgetting oneself, and Charity” (Openheim 69), imbibing these qualities as enjoined by this study would show the extent to which African cultures can express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony, and humanity. Apart from showing the extent, it would promote these virtues among younger Africans in search of practical African values. The understanding that African culture and spirituality are basically humanistic would play a huge role in inserting *Ubuntu* into the contemporary African consciousness, inspiring them to take pride in the spirit of *Ubuntu*.

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