From South Africa

THE MEANING AND RELEVANCE OF 'UBUNTU' IN THE CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN CONTEXT

by Luke Pato

In June 2003 I returned to South Africa after a week in the US. Apart from South Africa's relatively warm winter, what struck me most forcibly on my re-entry, was the daily TV, radio and newspaper's litany of corruption stories by senior government officials, dehumanising effects of poverty, struggles and disasters facing ordinary Africans; disasters which have no place or mention in the West. Malaria is causing the death of Ugandans and Mozambiquans even more rapidly than HIV/AIDS. War in Liberia, the DRC and the Sudan is causing many helpless people to uproot and flee from home once again. There is political turmoil in Zimbabwe and the seeming inability of the international community to intervene, as well as the threat of the ultra right wing 'boeremag' in South Africa. People in Africa live in fear of death. In the face of these, and many similar instances of suffering, is it simply a middle class luxury to be reconsidering the meaning and relevance of ubuntu and being African in the African context? I don't think so. Indeed I will be suggesting that it is our response to these very issues that may give rise to a new meaning and practical expression to the concept of ubuntu and being African.

Preliminary Remarks

I would like to begin by making three preliminary remarks.

The first is that the concept of ubuntu is rooted in a certain culture and milieu. For this reason, it cannot be transplanted and translated to the Africa of the 21st century without first understanding and unpacking the soil that fertilised it and gave it meaning. To have designations such as Ubuntu Cash loans, Ubuntu Local Authority, and ubuntu this or that only represents a debasing of a concept which once made sense. Ubuntu is neither a magic concept nor a cosy feeling. The question now surely is: can we attach any useful or inspiring meaning to the term?

Secondly, the concept of ubuntu is not only associated with a way of life in the continent of Africa but also with being African. It is often said that to be truly African is to embrace and to live ubuntu. But what can one say is the meaning of ubuntu as well as being African in a continent where many thousands of people face starvation as a daily reality, where young children are victims of rape and abuse, where women are terrified for their physical safety just because they are women, where forty thousand children die daily from preventable disease, because there is insufficient money available for medical care, but also where community and care are deeply valued? What does it really mean to be African?

The third remark concerns the notion 'African' particularly among South Africans. John Pobee, a Ghanaian theologian, has rightly observed that it is common among South Africans to say, 'I wish to go to Africa' when expressing a wish to visit Africa north of the Limpopo.[1] Indeed, South Africans have been socialised into thinking that Africa is north of the Limpopo. This view is held alongside myths of racial and ethnic superiority. Today one has only to listen to South Africans talking about refugees and immigrants from other African states to realise the vestiges of this kind of socialisation. Among the many lessons that South Africans have to learn is to see ourselves as Africans.

About the Article

This article begins by looking at the life world out of which ubuntu emerges and functions. To achieve this we will, among other things, examine some African folktales and proverbs that reflect the various aspects of ubuntu.

Secondly, we will examine challenges in the African context that call for active intervention and thus new ways of living out of ubuntu. The question we wrestle with here is : What is the meaning of ubuntu and being African in the context where the single common experience of all the people of Africa is suffering. Surely this situation challenges us to rethink the art and the vocation of being truly human persons.

My contention is that it is out of ongoing encounter with Africa that we are enabled to find a new meaning for ubuntu as well as a meaningful understanding of ourselves as Africans.

By way of conclusion I will paint an image from the African context that we could emulate as a model of ubuntu and being African in contemporary Africa.

A Brief Statement about Ubuntu

Ubuntu has many facets. But briefly stated, it is about the essence of being truly human. Ubuntu presupposes that life is sacred and that vibrant community life is the goal of all life. It embraces a sense of belonging to one another in such a way that the value of love, care, hospitality and respect for one another become indispensable ingredients. Desmond Tutu explains ubuntu in terms of need for one another in order to become fully human. He argues that the connotation of the term ubuntu derives from the expression *umntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu*, which means that each individual's humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others.[2] For me personally, ubuntu is not only about being truly human and interrelatedness of humanity but also about embracing and holding our own and others' wounds and suffering as marks of our very humanness.

The Culture and Milieu of the Philosophy and Practice of Ubuntu

The most obvious and earliest evidence of the culture and milieu of ubuntu finds expression in the folktales of Africa. Tales in Africa have a powerful didactic value. They represent a peculiarly African method of teaching. Traditionally, stories in Africa are told and retold repeatedly to depict life, to transmit values and to give wisdom for survival in life. A person can tell the same story differently depending on the audience and the issues that one wants to address. The characters in a story may change to suit the listeners and their circumstances. I am now going to refer to some of the stories that depict aspects of ubuntu in African thought. The choice of both the stories and the proverbs is limited to the Xhosa-speaking society because of our familiarity with it. However, versions of these tales and proverbs are available in other parts of Africa.

One of these stories [3] is about a young man who went out to search for his kidnapped sister. During his search, a vicious poisonous snake chased him. The young man offered the snake his father's cattle, horses and sheep. The snake swallowed all these and continued to chase him. He subsequently met other people who offered themselves to the snake and the snake finally gave up on him and he was able to rescue his sister.

This story attempts to transmit the value of caring and sharing of one's life with others even when that means losing one's life in the process. The story eschews selfishness and inward looking by upholding consideration of the needs and feelings of others for primary consideration.

Another story comes from a prescribed isiXhosa syllabus book we studied when I was doing the Bantu Education Junior Certificate. The book was entitled Ukhwane. Ukhwane was the name of the main character in the book. The setting of the book was in the Eastern Cape around Middle Drift. The story concerns the condemnation to death of people who were accused of witchcraft by Tshiwo, the local iNkosi (chief). The accused were supposed to be executed by being thrown alive into a pit as they were considered dangerous to the community. Khwane who was entrusted with responsibility to execute the accused decided to put them into a place of hiding until he had sufficient critical mass to oppose the killing of the accused.

This story seeks not only to illustrate how the power of iNkosi (the Chief) was subverted but also represents a classic example of ubuntu. Khwane is a symbol of a person who represents justice and what it means to be truly human.

Ubuntu manifests itself also in social relations. For example, in rural Xhosa society one cannot enjoy milk from one's cows when the neighbour has none to provide for the children. In such cases, the one who has a milk cow is not only expected but obliged to give to the neighbour what is traditionally known as *inkomo yenqoma* (a cow given to the one who does not have for a short time). Xhosa-speaking people have this dictum : *inkomo yenqoma yintsengwa bheka* (a cow given to the one who does not have is milked with eyes constantly over the shoulders – a reference to the fact that the cow is on loan).

However, when the milking period for the cow is over, the cow is returned to the owner and the calf is left behind for the one who has none to bring it up and feed the family. This practice is not confined to relatives but may be done for any one who has need. It illustrates the way in which rural and small farming communities uphold the value of sharing of resources, interdependence and co-operation. The practice discourages the instinct of acquisition, hoarding and competition.

Ubuntu manifests itself also in practices such as communal ploughing and hoeing. Here the community comes together and forms working parties to assist those who have no means of ploughing or hoeing once their own fields have been ploughed or hoed. This practice suggests that being truly human is about co-operation and not competition. Ironically, there is, in actual fact, fear of anyone who surpasses others in wealth, power or influence. The underlying fear is that such a person is perceived a public

danger because she has capacity to use the surplus for selfish and destructive purposes. In KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape there used to be a certain man named Khotso Sethuntse. He died about three decades ago now. He was very wealthy, and owned numerous unique houses in Kokstad, Mount Frere, Lusikisiki, and a sea cottage camp at Lombaas on the Natal coast. He was not a very sociable person in that he was rarely seen in public. Consequently other people feared him. It was even alleged that he possessed a snake, a reference to him as a public danger. However, it is alleged also that some people surreptitiously went to him so that he might invest them with powers to acquire wealth, prestige and power.

The point here is that this person was perceived to be negating the conventional understanding that each person's humanity is intertwined and interwoven with the humanity of others. His way of life did not reflect the inter-relatedness of human beings which is the hallmark of ubuntu and being truly African. Even more importantly, he did not live up to the community's expectations of what it means to be human and African.

One can go on and on giving a series of stories and illustrations that throw light on aspects of the meaning and practice of ubuntu. These stories emerge out of a rural, agrarian way of life; a way of life in which wealth was measured by the well being of the community. The real issue is : can we attach any useful and inspiring meaning and practice to ubuntu in contemporary Africa? In what ways can we emulate this way of life in the 21st century Africa? What are the challenges that invite us to rethink the art and vocation of being African? As has been mentioned already, my contention is that it is out of our ongoing encounter with the realities of Africa that we are enabled to find a new meaning of ubuntu as well as a meaningful understanding of ourselves as Africans. And so, we now turn to Africa's contemporary realities and struggles.

Africa's Contemporary Struggles

Africa is a continent of enormous cultural wealth and diversity. It is also, economically speaking, the poorest continent on earth. Its per capita death from AIDS is higher than anywhere else in the world. It is a continent where in some places, such as Nigeria, the infant mortality rate is 84 in 1000, five times higher than other developing countries.[4] Africa is a continent which suffers devastating drought, famine and floods. It is a continent in which as I speak three major wars are being waged. It is a

continent which has been colonised and plundered and continues to be held in colonial captivity by virtue of its economic dependence to say nothing of its material and cultural aspirations.

Africa is a continent still wracked culturally, economically and socially by the devastating effects of colonialism. Decades of economic plundering of natural resources and human labour have left Africa cripplingly indebted to European and American countries, multinationals and organisations. Just as women have been socialised into accepting that menial labour, lower wages, and poorer working conditions are their lot, so too, Africans have come to accept that raw materials are drawn from Africa and manufactured elsewhere, that technological skills and higher wages belong to people of the North and West and not to people of Africa.

The South African context is as complex and paradoxical as anywhere in Africa. South Africa is a country which is upheld internationally, as an example of hope and possibility for many, and yet it is a country plagued by violent crime and gang warfare. Immigrants and refugees are being chased out of the country as aliens. South Africa is country where our new democracy is celebrated, yet many of its children go to bed hungry at night, have inadequate medical care, little or no access to education and few employment opportunities.

In our new democracy, with one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, which seeks to protect all persons, South Africa is nevertheless one of the 'rape capitals' of the world, where a woman is raped every 26 seconds. Women in some parts of the country are still accused of being witches and killed as a result of such allegations.

And so, the single common issue for all Africans, the single common experience, the single defining question, is suffering. It seems to me that the global view of Africa is that at best it is seen as a basket case, and at worst is seen as the source of the world's evil, disease, conflict and trouble. Where else did AIDS first appear? Who else is asking for debt relief? Where else do we talk of symbolic reparations, community rehabilitation, healing and reconciliation? Where are some of the bloodiest conflicts, even genocides, of our time? It seems to me that, on a unique scale and in unique ways Africa and its people suffer. We suffer in obvious ways - from war and AIDS and poverty and famine. We suffer from drought and floods, cholera

and malaria. We suffer from the effects of colonisation and racism. We suffer from dispossession, displacement and homelessness. We suffer the effects of corrupt practices of our senior government officials.

We suffer also in more subtle ways the insidious effects of patriarchy. We suffer the often-unnamed insecurities or lack of self worth that we are not the same as the West and America in particular.

Surely this context calls for active intervention. It calls for an inspiring meaning of ubuntu and Africanness that is not sentimental, unlike the writing in most posters and billboards we encounter in the streets and highways of our continent.

What does it mean to be African?

For me, being 'African' is not about one's skin colour or one whose place of birth or chosen place of residence is Africa.

To be African is to suffer both in an individual sense and in the sense that one suffers with those who suffer. However, I think that to be truly African is also to engage with that suffering rather than attempting to deny or escape it. In the process of engagement with suffering we discover our humanity and together give expression to what it means to be human. We discover our ubuntu and together we give expression to it in practice. We discover our Africanness and together become truly African.

What I am suggesting is that to be truly African is to embrace and hold my own and others' wounds and suffering as marks of my very humanness. How dare I say this?

I say this because, when I live my life in a hermetically sealed bubble, immune from the suffering of others, I may feel safe and secure - at least I am not the one who has AIDS, or who is poor. At least I am not the one who is homeless, or hungry. Yet this isolation diminishes my humanity. Who am I, in this sealed bubble? Conversely, when I take courage and embrace the sufferings of others; when their wounds become mine; I suddenly discover a deep bond between us. I am no longer alone, as the other is no longer alone in her suffering.

Even stranger than this seeming paradox, together, we discover a way that endures beyond death. Because when my life is intimately tied up with that of others, my life will, even after my individual death, live on in those others, just as I live the life of others right now. Of course, the existential

anxieties will continue. This way of life is not an anaesthetic which removes all pain and anxiety. However, in community, in the living out of ubuntu, our humanity is both discovered and expressed.

Exactly the converse of ubuntu and Africanness is being played out in South Africa. I refer to the attacks on nationals of other African states. In the very denial of hospitality, in the refusal to enter the suffering of refugees from situations of war, poverty and disease, we are denying our own humanity. We are destroying our own humanness.

When we embrace our own, and others' otherness, we discover a new richness. For embracing others or otherness serves as a reminder that acknowledgment of our difference can makes us discover who we truly are. It is as we let go of comfortable boundaries, that we can begin to discover who we truly are in relation to others, and the extent to which others have enriched us.

The temptation of course is always to escape suffering and the challenge to embrace others' wounds - by acquiring material goods, or education for example; or by emigrating, or by identifying with the coca cola culture of America, or by simply denying who we truly are deep down, or by choosing to ignore what and who we truly are. We can escape the suffering of being different, by simply conforming, without question.

In South Africa there is the temptation to escape our Africanness by suggesting that it is the fault of corrupt governments or crazy dictators or people with less drive and ambition that other countries to the north of us suffer more than we. We take pride in being richer, more successful, more educated, more like the West. 'They' have not got it right. We take pride in being south of the Limpopo as though that places us out of the African continent.

If we do take courage and look inwards, we are sometimes too frightened by what we see to stay. So we are faced with the disconcertingly high rate of emigration of the wealthy upper middle class South Africans. Could this be a form of escape from the wounds of Africa? Could this be an escape from the challenge of ubuntu and the vocation to be African?

If we are to be truly African and embrace ubuntu we cannot choose to ignore or even hope to escape the suffering of Africa. We simply have to engage

with it, carry it as a wound to our own being. If we do not search for ways to respond to our suffering and that of others, I would suggest that we have turned away from one of the major factors which shapes our identity and our life's meaning.

I once read a book by a Czechoslovakian writer Milan Kundera entitled *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.[5] One of its ideas which resonates deeply with me is the idea that one becomes less human, unbearably light if you like, if one attempts to escape or avoid the suffering that is necessarily one's own. This is a profound recognition: that to be human is to suffer - to suffer one's own wounds. I would add that to be truly human also means to suffer through the mutual carrying of the wounds of others as if they were our own. Only so, can we become fully human. Only so can we live out ubuntu. Only so can we be truly African.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to leave you with an image that I hope speaks to you as it does to me. It is the image, the icon, of Nkosi Johnson, the young AIDS activist who died two years ago in Johannesburg. In a way far more mature than his 11 years, here is a young African who has entered bravely into his own wounds and in so doing has become a symbol of hope and new life for many. In a wonderful way, he has escaped the bounds of death. His life, his courage and his hope will live on in many of us. His is a wonderful example of ubuntu and being truly African.

As Nkosi suffered, he did not do so alone. His foster mother, Gail, is a good illustration of the kind of ubuntu and Africanness I have been describing. She could have said: 'This is not my child, my problem'. However, knowing that she would, knowing probably that she would come to love the little child, she took him in and raised him. She embraced Nkosi's wounds as her own.

Nkosi and Gail, two real-life examples of the kind of ubuntu and Africanness I have been trying to describe. I wonder if we dare emulate them?

Notes

1. John S. Pobee (1997) "Two Species in a Genre and Two Carriages of a Moving Train" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 99 (Nov.) p122.
2. cf Michael Battle (1997) *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, Cleveland, Ohio, Pilgrim Press.
3. H. Scheub (1975) The Xhosa Ntsomi, Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp 185-193.
4. Chris McGreal (1999) "Nigeria: Throwing Good Money after Bad". *Mail* and *The Guardian*, June 18-24.
5. Milan Kundera (1984) *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, New York, Harper and Row.

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