أوبونتو

Ubuntu (philosophy)

This article is about philosophy. For other uses, see Ubuntu.

Ubuntu (/ʊˈbuːntʊ/ *uu-BOON-tuu*; Zulu pronunciation:

Nelson Mandela in 2006 was asked to define "ubuntu" in a video used to launch Ubuntu Linux.[1]

[ùɓúnt'ú])[2][3] is a Nguni Bantu term roughly translating to "human kindness." It is an idea from the Southern African region which means literally "human-ness," and is often translated as "humanity toward others," but is often used in a more philosophical sense to mean "the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity".[4]

In Southern Africa, it has come to be used as a term for a kind of humanist philosophy, ethic or ideology, also known as **Ubuntuism** or **Hunhuism** (the latter after the corresponding Shona term) propagated in the Africanization (transition to majority rule) process of these countries during the 1980s and 1990s.

Since the transition to democracy in South Africa with the Nelson Mandela presidency in 1994, the term has become more widely known outside of Southern Africa, notably popularized to English language readers by Desmond Tutu (1999).

1 History of the concept

The term *ubuntu* appears in South African sources from as early as the mid-19th century. Reported translations covered the semantic field of "human nature, humanness, humanity; virtue, goodness, kindness". Grammatically, the word combines the root *-ntu* "person, human being" with the class 14 *ubu-* prefix forming abstract nouns,[5] so

that the term is exactly parallel in formation to the abstract noun *humanity*.[6]

The concept was popularized in terms of a "philosophy" or "world view" (as opposed to a quality attributed to an individual) beginning in the 1950s, notably in the writings of Jordan Kush Ngubane published in the *African Drum* magazine. From the 1970s, the *ubuntu* began to be described as a specific kind of "African humanism". Based on the context of Africanization propagated by the political thinkers in the 1960s period of decolonization, *ubuntu* was used as a term for a specifically African (or Southern African) kind of socialism or humanism found in blacks, but lacking in whites, in the context of the transition to black majority rule in Zimbabwe and South Africa. The first publication dedicated to *ubuntu* as a philosophical concept appeared in 1980, *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy* (*hunhu* being the Shona equivalent of Nguni *ubuntu*) by Stanlake J. W. T. Samkange. Hunhuism or Ubuntuism is presented as political ideology for the new Zimbabwe, as Southern Rhodesia was granted independence from the United Kingdom. From Zimbabwe, the concept was taken over in South Africa in the 1990s as a guiding ideal for the transition from apartheid to majority rule. The term appears in the Epilogue of the Interim Constitution of South Africa (1993), "there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for *ubuntu* but not for victimization".[7]

2 Definition

There are many different, and not always compatible, definitions of what ubuntu is (for a survey of how ubuntu is defined among South Africans of African descent see Gade 2012: "What is Ubuntu? Different Interpretations among South Africans of African Descent"[8]). Ubuntu asserts that society, not a transcendent being, gives human beings their humanity. An example is a Zulu-speaking person who when telling you to speak in Zulu would say "*khuluma isintu*," which means "speak the language of people". When someone behaves according to custom, a Sotho-speaking person would say "*ke motho*," which means "he/she is a human". The exclusionary and abhorrent aspect of this would be exemplified by a tale told (often, in private quarters) in Nguni "*kushone abantu ababili ne Shangaan*", in Sepedi "*go tlhokofetje batho ba babedi le leShangane*", in English (two people died and one Shangaan). In each of these examples, humanity

comes from conforming to or being part of the tribe.

According to Michael Onyebuchi Eze, the core of ubuntu can best be summarized as follows:

> " 'A person is a person through other people' strikes an affirmation of one's humanity through recognition of an 'other' in his or her uniqueness and difference. It is a demand for a creative intersubjective formation in which the 'other' becomes a mirror (but only a mirror) for my subjectivity. This idealism suggests to us that humanity is not embedded in my person solely as an individual; my humanity is co-substantively bestowed upon the other and me. Humanity is a quality we owe to each other. We create each other and need to sustain this otherness creation. And if we belong to each other, we participate in our creations: we are because you are, and since you are, definitely I am. The 'I am' is not a rigid subject, but a dynamic self-constitution dependent on this otherness creation of relation and distance".[9]

An "extroverted communities" aspect is the most visible part of this ideology. There is sincere warmth with which people treat both strangers and members of the community. This overt display of warmth is not merely aesthetic but enables formation of spontaneous communities (co-operatives if you will). The resultant collaborative work within these spontaneous communities transcends the aesthetic and gives functional significance to the value of warmth. How else are you to ask for sugar from your neighbour? Warmth is not the sine qua non of community formation but guards against instrumentalist relationships. Unfortunately, sincere warmth may leave one vulnerable to those with ulterior motives.

"Ubuntu" as political philosophy has aspects of socialism, propagating the redistribution of wealth. This is similar to redistributive policies in liberalism. This socialisation is a vestige of agrarian peoples as a hedge against the crop failures of individuals. Socialisation presupposes a community population with which individuals empathise and concomitantly, have a vested interest in its collective prosperity. Urbanisation and the aggregation of people into an abstract and bureaucratic state undermines this empathy. African Intellectual historians like Michael Onyebuchi Eze have argued however that this ideal of "collective responsibility" must not be understood as absolute in which the community's good is prior to the individual's good. On this view, ubuntu it is argued, is a communitarian philosophy that is widely differentiated from the Western notion of communitarian socialism. In fact, ubuntu induces an ideal of shared human subjectivity that promotes a community's good through an unconditional recognition and appreciation of individual uniqueness and difference[10]

"Redemption" relates to how people deal with errant, de-

viant and dissident members of the community. The belief is that man is born formless like a lump of clay. It is up to the community, as a whole, to use the fire of experience and the wheel of social control to mold him into a pot that may be of general use. Any imperfections should be borne by the community and the community should always seek to redeem man. An example of this is the statement by the African National Congress (in South Africa) that it does not throw out its own but rather redeems. A possible limitation of this is that not all clay is the same and not all tools are pots or of general use. Likewise, not all people are the same or similar, and not all people are fated to have the same or similar function.

3   Zimbabwe

In the Shona language, the majority spoken language in Zimbabwe after English, ubuntu is *unhu*. The concept of ubuntu is viewed the same in Zimbabwe as in other African cultures, and the Zulu saying is also common in Shona: *munhu munhu nekuda kwevanhu*.

Stanlake J. W. T. Samkange (1980) highlights the three maxims of Hunhuism or Ubuntuism that shape this philosophy: The first maxim asserts that 'To be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish respectful human relations with them.' And 'the second maxim means that if and when one is faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being, then one should opt for the preservation of life'. The third 'maxim' as a 'principle deeply embedded in traditional African political philosophy' says 'that the king owed his status, including all the powers associated with it, to the will of the people under him'.

While sharing is incorporated within "unhu", it is only one of the multiplicity of virtues within "unhu". In the "unhu" domain, visitors do not need to burden themselves with carrying provisions – all they need is to dress properly and be on the road. All visitors are provided for and protected in every home they pass through without payment being expected. In fact, every individual should try his or her best to make visitors comfortable – and this applies to everyone who is aware of the presence of a visitor within a locality.

Other manifestations of ubuntu are that it is taboo to call elderly people by their given names; instead they are called by their surnames. This has the effect of banishing individualism and replacing it with a representative role, in which the individual effectively stands for the people among whom he comes from at all times. The individual identity is replaced with the larger societal identity within the individual. Thus, families are portrayed or reflected in the individual and this phenomenon is extended to villages, districts, provinces and regions being portrayed in the individual. This places high demands on the individ-

ual to behave in the highest standards and to portray the highest possible virtues that society strives for. "Unhu" embodies all the invaluable virtues that society strives for towards maintaining harmony and the spirit of sharing among its members.

A key concept associated with "unhu" is how we behave and interact in our various social roles, e.g., daughters-in-law traditionally kneel down when greeting their parents-in-law and serve them food as a sign of respect and maintain the highest standards of behaviour that will be extended or reflected to her family and all the women raised in that family. The daughter-in-law does this as part of the ambassadorial function that she plays and assumes at all times. However, this does not apply only to daughters-in-law but to all women in general, even among friends and equals such as brother and sister, and this does not imply that the woman is subordinate to the man, or sister to brother. It is all essentially considered to be a characteristic of having "unhu" and a social interaction within the context of "unhu". The demands imposed upon men within the context of "unhu" are more physically demanding than that placed upon the woman.

Under "unhu" children are never orphans since the roles of mother and father are by definition not vested in a single individual with respect to a single child. Furthermore, a man or a woman with "unhu" will never allow any child around them to be an orphan.

The concept of "unhu" also constitutes the kernel of African Traditional Jurisprudence as well as leadership and governance. In the concept of unhu, a crime committed by one individual on another extends far beyond the two individuals and has far-reaching implications to the people from among whom the perpetrator of the crime comes. Unhu jurisprudence tends to support remedies and punishments that tend to bring people together. For instance, a crime of murder would lead to the creation of a bond of marriage between the victim's family and the accused's family in addition to the perpetrator being punished both inside and outside his social circles. The role of "tertiary perpetrator" to the murder crime is extended to the family and the society where the individual perpetrator hails from. However, the punishment of the tertiary perpetrator is a huge fine and a social stigma, which they must shake off after many years of demonstrating *unhu* or *ubuntu*. A leader who has *unhu* is selfless and consults widely and listens to subjects. Such a person does not adopt a lifestyle that is different from the subjects and lives among them and shares property. A leader who has "unhu" does not lead, but allows the people to lead themselves and cannot impose his will on his people, which is incompatible with "unhu".

4   South Africa

Ubuntu: "I am what I am because of who we all are." (From a definition offered by Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee.)

Archbishop Desmond Tutu offered a definition in a 1999 book:[11]

> A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, based from 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.

Tutu further explained Ubuntu in 2008:[12]

> One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu – the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality – Ubuntu – you are known for your generosity.
> We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole World. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity.

Nelson Mandela explained Ubuntu as follows:[13]

> A traveller 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 and attend him. That is one aspect of Ubuntu, but it will have various aspects. Ubuntu does not mean that people should not enrich themselves. The question therefore is: Are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to be able to improve?

Tim Jackson refers to Ubuntu as a philosophy that supports the changes he says are necessary to create a future that is economically and environmentally sustainable.[14]

Judge Colin Lamont expanded on the definition during his ruling on the hate speech trial of Julius Malema:[15]

> Ubuntu is recognised as being an important source of law within the context of strained or broken relationships amongst individuals or communities and as an aid for providing remedies which contribute towards more mutually acceptable remedies for the parties in such cases. Ubuntu is a concept which:

1. is to be contrasted with vengeance;

2. dictates that a high value be placed on the life of a human being;

3. is inextricably linked to the values of and which places a high premium on dignity, compassion, humaneness and respect for humanity of another;

4. dictates a shift from confrontation to mediation and conciliation;

5. dictates good attitudes and shared concern;

6. favours the re-establishment of harmony in the relationship between parties and that such harmony should restore the dignity of the plaintiff without ruining the defendant;

7. favours restorative rather than retributive justice;

8. operates in a direction favouring reconciliation rather than estrangement of disputants;

9. works towards sensitising a disputant or a defendant in litigation to the hurtful impact of his actions to the other party and towards changing such conduct rather than merely punishing the disputant;

10. promotes mutual understanding rather than punishment;

11. favours face-to-face encounters of disputants with a view to facilitating differences being resolved rather than conflict and victory for the most powerful;

12. favours civility and civilised dialogue premised on mutual tolerance.

Ndilenga Elastus (student at International University of Management, Ongwediva Campus) from Namibia states that "In Namibia specifically Oshiwambo speaking people supports Ubuntu by saying Umbuntu, there is a saying in Oshiwambo that states "Omuhenda nandjila iha tindilwa omulalo' (in English means "a traveler can't be denied accommodation") this matches Nelson Mandela phrases about Umbuntu (in Oshiwambo)

At Nelson Mandela's memorial, United States President Barack Obama spoke about Ubuntu, saying, "There is a word in South Africa – Ubuntu – a word that captures Mandela's greatest gift: his recognition that we are all bound together in ways that are invisible to the eye; that there is a oneness to humanity; that we achieve ourselves by sharing ourselves with others, and caring for those around us.

We can never know how much of this sense was innate in him, or how much was shaped in a dark and solitary cell.

But we remember the gestures, large and small – introducing his jailers as honored guests at his inauguration; taking a pitch in a Springbok uniform; turning his family's heartbreak into a call to confront HIV/AIDS – that revealed the depth of his empathy and his understanding. He not only embodied Ubuntu, he taught millions to find that truth within themselves." [16]

5   Malawi

In Malawi, the same philosophy is called "uMunthu".[17] According to the Catholic Diocese of Zomba bishop Rt. Rev. Fr. Thomas Msusa, "The African worldview is about living as one family, belonging to God".[18] Msusa noted that in Africa "We say 'I am because we are', or in Chichewa *kali kokha nkanyama, tili awiri ntiwanthu* (when you are on your own you are as good as an animal of the wild; when there are two of you, you form a community)."

The philosophy of uMunthu has been passed on through proverbs such as *Mwana wa mnzako ngwako yemwe, ukachenjera manja udya naye* (your neighbor's child is your own, his/her success is your success too).[18] Some notable Malawian uMunthu philosophers and intellectuals who have written about this worldview are Augustine Musopole, Gerard Chigona, Chiwoza Bandawe, Richard Tambulasi, Harvey Kwiyani and Happy Kayuni. This includes Malawian philosopher and theologian Harvey Sindima's treatment of uMunthu as an important African philosophy is highlighted in his 1995 book 'Africa's Agenda: The legacy of liberalism and colonialism in the crisis of African values'.[19] In film, the English translation of the proverb lent its hand to forming the title of Madonna's documentary, "I Am Because We Are" about Malawian orphans.

6   "Ubuntu Diplomacy"

In June 2009, in her swearing-in remarks as U.S. Department of State Special Representative for Global Partnerships, Global Partnership Initiative, Office of the Secretary of State (served June 18, 2009 – October 10, 2010), Elizabeth Frawley Bagley discussed ubuntu in the context of American foreign policy, stating: "In understanding the responsibilities that come with our interconnectedness, we realize that we must rely on each other to lift our World from where it is now to where we want it to be in our lifetime, while casting aside our worn out preconceptions, and our outdated modes of statecraft." She then introduced the notion of "Ubuntu Diplomacy" with the following words:

> In 21st-century diplomacy, the Department of State will be a convener, bringing people together from across regions and sectors to

work together on issues of common interest. Our work no longer depends on the least common denominator; but rather, we will seek the highest possible multiplier effect for the results we can achieve together.

We will also act as a catalyst, with our Foreign Service Officers launching new projects in tandem with those NGOs, philanthropies, and corporations at the front lines of foreign affairs to discover untapped potential, inspire fresh ideas, and create new solutions.

And we will act as a collaborator, leading interagency coordination here in Washington and cross-sector collaboration in the field, with our Ambassadors working closely with our non-governmental partners to plan and implement projects for maximum impact and sustainability.

In the same way that Secretary Clinton has often said that 'it takes a village to raise a child,' we are now realizing that we must apply a similar approach worldwide. It takes a shared, global response to meet the shared, global challenges we face. This is the truth taught to us in an old South African principle, ubuntu, or 'A person is a person through other persons.' As Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes this perspective, ubuntu 'is not, "I think therefore I am." It says rather: "I am a human because I belong. I participate. I share."' In essence, I am because you are.

We are truly all in this together, and we will only succeed by building mutually beneficial partnerships among civil society, the private sector, and the public sector, in order to empower the men and women executing our foreign policy to advance their work through partnerships.

The truth and reconciliation council believed in the philosophy of Ubuntu because they believed that Ubuntu was going to help to reform and reconnect the already broken country of South Africa.

This is Ubuntu Diplomacy: where all sectors belong as partners, where we all participate as stakeholders, and where we all succeed together, not incrementally but exponentially.[20]

7   In popular culture

Ubuntu was a major theme in John Boorman's 2004 film *In My Country*.[21] Former US president Bill Clinton used the term at the 2006 Labour Party conference in the UK to explain why society is important.[22] The Boston Celtics, the 2008 NBA champions, have chanted

"ubuntu" when breaking a huddle since the start of the 2007–2008 season.[23]

At the 2002 UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), there was an Ubuntu Village exposition center.[24] Ubuntu was the theme of the 76th General Convention of the American Episcopal Church.[25] The logo includes the text "I in You and You in Me".

In October 2004 Mark Shuttleworth, a South African entrepreneur and owner of UK based company Canonical Ltd., founded the Ubuntu Foundation that is the company behind the creation of a computer operating system based on Debian GNU/Linux. He named the Linux distribution Ubuntu.[26]

In film, the English translation of the proverb lent its hand to forming the title of pop singer Madonna's documentary, "I Am Because We Are" about Malawian orphans.

A character in the 2008 animated comedy *The Goode Family* is named Ubuntu.

Ubuntu was the title and theme of an EP released by British band Clockwork Radio in 2012.

"UBUNTU Cosmic Energy: the Ethical Basis for Future Worldists"[27] is an article published in *Global Education Magazine* for the World Health Day:

> "...we must promote the *humanist philosophy UBUNTU*, as thought, awareness, and understanding metastructure of the *sociobiology and antropoetic evolutionary convergence*. In this sense, the Ubuntu ethological polymorphism represents wisdom to learn to grow together as a world-society, because the ontologic pluricultural simbiosophy adjacent in its spiritual essence is an emergent element for ethical future.(...) This reconsideration demands effective authenticity with a thoughtful civic consciousness shift capable of enduring sustainable development in harmony with nature. Thus, the paradigm shift implies a holistic view of the human being and the universe itself from the perspective of consciousness, where we are all interconnected."[27]

8   See also

- Africanization

- Bantu peoples

- Decolonisation

- Ethic of reciprocity

- Harambee (Kenyan/Swahili concept)

- Humanity (virtue)

- Negotiations to end apartheid in South Africa

- Nguni languages

- Pan-Africanism

9   References

[1] Interviewed by Tim Modise, copyright by Canonical Ltd.--transcription: "In the old days, when we were young, a traveler through the 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."

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[3] "Desmond Tutu on Ubuntu". Retrieved 11 January 2015.

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[5] see also Zulu noun classes on Wiktionary.

[6] in the sense of an abstract quality. The sense "mankind" is taken by the class 7 collective noun *isintu*.

[7] Christian B.N. Gade, "The Historical Development of the Written Discourses on Ubuntu", South African Journal of Philosophy 30(3), 303–329.

[8] Gade, C.B.N. 2012. "What is Ubuntu? Different Interpretations among South Africans of African Descent", South African Journal of Philosophy 31(3), 484–503.

[9] Eze, M.O. Intellectual History in Contemporary South Africa, pp. 190–191

[10] Eze, M.O. What is African Comunitarianism? Against consensus as a regulative Ideal. 2008, South African Journal of Philosophy Vol. 27:4, pp. 386–399

[11] Tutu, Desmond (1999). *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Image. ISBN 0-385-49690-7.

[12] "Ubuntu Women Institute USA (UWIU) with SSIWEL as its first South Sudan Project". http://www.ssiwel.org/ [Note: This web page no longer exists; now at http://uwi-usa.blogspot.be/2012/01/ubuntu-brief-meaning-of-african-word.html]: Ubuntu Women Institute USA. Retrieved 2011-04-20. Archbishop Desmond Tutu further explained Ubuntu in 2008. "One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu – the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality – Ubuntu – you are known for your generosity.

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[21] The New York Times, March 25, 2005

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11 External links

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12.1   Text

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