

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

Dirk J. Louw

Introduction¹

*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu.*² *Motho ke motho ka batho.* These are, respectively, the Zulu³ 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",⁴ 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.⁵ 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>>).⁶

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”).⁷ 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.⁸ 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*,⁹ 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).¹⁰

In fact, even the faintest attempt at an “original”¹¹ 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,¹² 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.¹³ All of which is much easier said than done (or should I say applied?).¹⁴

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,¹⁵ precisely because it safeguards the rights of individuals and minorities, better than any majoritarian democracy could.¹⁶

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).¹⁷ 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”.¹⁸ 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).¹⁹ “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”.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²² Being an individual by definition means "being-with-others". "With-others", as Macquarrie²³ rightly observes, "...is not added on to a pre-existent and self-sufficient being; rather, both this being (the self) and the others²⁴ find themselves in a whole wherein they are already related" (1972:104).²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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).²⁷

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 thought²⁸ addresses this (apparent) contradiction in the (somewhat controversial)²⁹ idea of *seriti*,³⁰ i.e. an energy,³¹ 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).³²

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?³³

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).³⁴

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.³⁵ 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.³⁶

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,³⁷ 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).³⁸ 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.³⁹ Some may even want to claim that I have been enslaving the African Other through Eurocentric, neo-colonialist (re)definition.⁴⁰ If so, then it should be viewed as the, perhaps inevitable, off-spin of an honest effort to understand and effectively apply a pre-modern⁴¹ 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,⁴² 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.

Notes:

- ¹ 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).
- ² Alternatively: *Umuntu ungumuntu ngabanye abantu*.
- ³ 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.
- ⁴ 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).
- ⁵ 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).
- ⁶ Cf. also the Government Gazette, 02/02/1996, No.16943, p.18, paragraph 18, as cited by Broodryk (1997a:1).
- ⁷ 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”).

- ⁸ For an explanation of the Ubuntu conception of "extended family", cf. Broodryk (1997a:14; 1997b:70f; Shutte, 1998a:18).
- ⁹ The word "calabash" is also used to refer to the beer container.
- ¹⁰ Ubuntu is often defined in religious terms. Cf. for example Koka (1996:2-3).
- ¹¹ 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).
- ¹² According to some authors no such hierarchy is assumed (cf. Kimmerle, 1995:110).
- ¹³ Cf. Sindane (1994:7), Degenaar (1994; 1996:23), Kimmerle (1995:101-103), Prinsloo (1998:49), and Shutte (1998a:108-109).
- ¹⁴ 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.
- ¹⁵ 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).
- ¹⁶ 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).
- ¹⁷ 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!
- ¹⁸ 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.
- ¹⁹ 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).
- ²⁰ 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).
- ²¹ 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).
- ²² 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).
- ²³ 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).
- ²⁴ Who, for the traditional African, include both ancestors and descendants (cf. Teffo, 1994a:8).
- ²⁵ 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.
- ²⁶ 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).
- ²⁷ 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).
- ²⁸ 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).
- ²⁹ Cf. Kaphagawani (1998:170-172).
- ³⁰ If this is indeed the appropriate word (cf. More, 1996:153-154; Ramose, 1999:194).
- ³¹ Also cf. Shutte (1998b:434-435).
- ³² 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).
- ³³ Cf. also Broodryk (1997a:10).

- ³⁴ Cf. also Shutte (1998a:112), and Van Binsbergen (1999) on the “African technology of reconciliation”.
- ³⁵ 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).
- ³⁶ 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).
- ³⁷ 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).
- ³⁸ 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).
- ³⁹ 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).
- ⁴⁰ 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.
- ⁴¹ 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).

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

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