

Ubuntu Philosophy and the New Nigeria

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Abstract

Disintegration, tribalism and lack of tolerance are the major challenges affecting the African society in general and Nigeria in particular. These issues have caused (and are causing) more harm among human persons. This paper looks at the philosophy of Ubuntu as the major solution to these issues. Ubuntu Ethics as a set of values provided an opportunity for human beings to live according to certain human and humane principles such as reciprocity, common good, peaceful relations, emphasis on human dignity and the value of human life, as well as consensus, tolerance, and mutual respect. In other words, respect, solidarity, human dignity and compassion are the main tenets of Ubuntu philosophy. Ubuntu has to do with instilling the culture of humanism, compassion and love which are indispensable in the re-making of a new Nigerian nation. This paper sustains that with Ubuntu Philosophy, the society would become peaceful and more habitable for all. The hermeneutic method was adopted for this article.

Keywords: Ubuntu, culture, Nigeria, humanism, South Africa, philosophy.

Introduction

Nigeria is one of the heterogenous societies in Africa. This implies that, it is a society with diverse cultures and this diversity has led to several issues and problems. In otherwards, she has become a divided nation, torn apart along the lines of ethnic, cultural, and religious differences. The impact of this division has not only retarded national growth and sustainable development, but more significantly, breeds intolerance, nepotism, and hatred that mar the peaceful co-habitation and existence. This negates the African metaphysical idea of communalism as against

the Western idea of individualism.

Similarly, Ubuntu is the philosophy of brotherhood. It can also be seen as an African philosophy of personhood extols the positive potentialities of the human person and describes the intrinsic connection between humanity and the eco-system. In other words, it explicates the narrative notion of the human person in African ontology, account of peaceful co-existence in Nigeria, a country torn apart by ethnic, cultural, and religious differences.

As ubuntu describes the innate African spirit of togetherness, which has been adulterated with individualism, nepotism amongst others in Nigeria. This culture of individualism breeds so many societal vices; such as lack of respect for the well-being of other members of the community, lack of genuine concern and respect for one another and consequently creates an atmosphere of tension, agitations, and violent conflicts. This, in recent times, characterizes the Nigerian state. Based on that, the questions become; how do we rebuild the moral fabric of society that has degenerated so much and where values have disappeared? Where do we start? These questions and many of its kinds are the major concern of this paper.

Characterizing Ubuntu as an African Philosophy

Ubuntu is a south African word for humanness (being human). In other words, it emphasizes human value and the good of the community above self-interest. Hence, Claire E. Oppenheim explains:

The word Ubuntu comes from the Xhosa/Zulu culture... and has been summarized in the phrase, —*Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu* in the Nguni language of Xhosa, Zulu, or Ndebele. The concept of this phrase can be translated to mean, —A person is a person through other persons, or —I am because we

are.¹

Ubuntu is therefore an innate duty to support one's fellow man. People should enrich themselves, but true enrichment will naturally align with the duty to act towards the spiritual growth of one's community. Kevin Chaplin adds:

Ubuntu is the potential for being human, to value the good of the community above self-interest. Ubuntu is to strive to help people in the spirit of service, to show respect to others and to be honest and trustworthy. Ubuntu regards humanity as an integral part of the eco-systems that lead to a communal responsibility to sustain life²

Ubuntu is a spiritual ideal, a way of life, interested to help people in the spirit of service, to show respect to others and to be honest and trustworthy. It retains the same core of meaning that is both a goal and a guide for humanity. Richard Bolden explains more:

Ubuntu is perhaps best understood as a social philosophy based on principles of care and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness that expresses the fundamental interconnectedness of human existence. It has also been described as a philosophy of peace and is perhaps best known as a guiding concept of the 'African Renaissance'.³

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1. Richard Bolden, "Ubuntu", *Encyclopedia of Action Research* (London: Sage Publications, 2014), 1
 2. Kevin Chaplin, "The Ubuntu Spirit in African Communities", available at www.google.com accessed on July 2023.
 3. Bolden, "Ubuntu", 1

However, Ubuntu lies in the center of every human and it also embodies a distinctive worldview of the human community, identities, values, rights, norms and responsibilities of its given members. According to Kevin Chaplin, the cardinal spirit of Ubuntu is expressed in Xhosa, as

Umntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu understood in English as “People are people through other people” and “I am human because I belong to the human community and I view and treat others accordingly.”⁴

This implies that it is “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. It also acknowledges both the right and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being”⁵ This statement however communicates a basic respect, empathy, love and compassion for others.

The ubuntu spirit is line with the popular aphorism; 'an injury to one is an injury to all'. This reinforces community sentiment. Hence, a person with Ubuntu spirit is open and available to others, affirms and respects others, and does not feel threatened by others' strengths or abilities, because he or she recognizes that we all belong to a greater whole.

The Principles of Ubuntu

Mbigi bases his model on four principles which he derives from the Ubuntu view of life:

- Morality which involves trust and credibility.
- Interdependence which concerns the sharing and caring aspect that is co-operation and participation.

⁴. Chaplin, “The Ubuntu Spirit in African Communities”

⁵. Bolden, “Ubuntu”, 3

- Spirit of man which refers to human dignity and mutual respect that insists that human activity should be person driven and humanness should be central, and lastly.
- Totality, which pertains to continuous improvement of everything by every member.

Some other principles include:

Interdependence. Ubuntu preaches interdependence, which holds that the success and well-being of one, depends on the others. In other words, Interdependency entails that the state of being is dependent upon one another. It stresses relationship between two or more people that depend on each other for survival. "Interdependence is a connection between subjects where one subjects needs can be fulfilled by the other subjects resources and these transfer of resources works both ways. Richard Bolden explains;

Ubuntu is a relational philosophy, where the individual is a being -with, ... These points towards a strongly constructivist ontology in which a person's sense of being cannot be detached from the social context in which they find themselves. It highlights the importance of a subjective and emotional appreciation of human experience rather than privileging objectivity and rationality. To be truly human, real and authentic, the individual is never in isolation with others. He is in communion, in *koinonia* with others in the world.⁶

Ubuntu fosters a spirit of collaboration and cooperation, as it is believed that working together benefits the entire community and society as a whole.

6. Bolden, "Ubuntu", 5

Inclusivity is another principle. Ubuntu is both centered inclusivity and collectivity in orientation, hence - expressing the value of integration, collaboration, cooperation and community. Ubuntu is described as an inclusive approach which calls for dignity and respect in our relationships with others. Richard Bolden explains more:

Ubuntu espouses an ethos of care and respect for others and the importance of solidarity in the face of adversity...It is also well suited to asset-based approaches, such as appreciative inquiry, that emphasize the need to recognize and build on strengths rather than focusing on how to resolve weaknesses.⁷

This is the sense of rootedness, common brotherhood and African collective identity. The individual is never defaced, but existed as a being-for-itself. John Mbiti captures this:

In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people... he is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create or produce the individual.⁸

For the individual to be real and authentic, he has to exit with others. It is this togetherness

The human being living and acting together in the same world that constitutes his self-realization and self-actualization.

However, ubuntu is centered on Inter-subjectivity. The concept of Ubuntu is

7. L. Mbigi, *Ubuntu: The Dream in African Management* (Randburg: Knowledge Resources, 1997), 23

8. John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 46

intersubjective in that it focuses on the relationship between the individual and the collective, rather than privileging one over the other. The inter-subjective dimension of Ubuntu is further highlighted through calls for greater inclusion of indigenous knowledge in education and organizational practice and even the incorporation of spirituality.

From this perspective a detailed appreciation of context and how it influences the subjective realities of different parties is an essential part of the knowledge creation process. Through a relational lens, however, such as that provided by Ubuntu, people and communities cease to be passive objects and become protagonists of their own development. By reconceptualizing human rather than financial capacity as the enabler of constructive social transformation, the aggregate capacity of billions who have traditionally been regarded as the recipients of aid are meaningfully integrated into global processes of (social, intellectual, cultural, spiritual, moral, and economic) development. Ubuntu places people and their relationships to one another at the center of concern, thereby mobilizing a majority whose capacity has thus far remained untapped. Such capacity is defined not only by a theoretical potential to achieve goals, but also by the moral impetus or determination to do so. As such, leveraging capacity becomes not only that which one is able to do, but that which one chooses to do. Intersubjectivity, therefore serves as the basis for supportiveness, cooperation, collaboration and solidarity.

Tolerance is another principle. According to Nonceba Nolundi Mabovula, Tolerance is a value to be achieved by deepening people's understanding of the origins, evolution and achievements of humanity on the one hand and through the exploration of that which is common and diverse in cultural heritage on the other.⁹ Humans live, associate and disagree. Disagreements need not cause harm if there is tolerance and respect for the other's viewpoint in the community structure.

9. Nonceba Nolundi Mabovula, "The Erosion of African Communal Values: A

Tolerance is the idea that one must not disregard other people's points of view (not even about important moral issues). In addition, the value of tolerance has become even more important now that we live side by side with people who are very different from us. If a society is not tolerant, then there cannot be true freedom. Highlighting the importance of tolerance does not suggest that it is the only value that community members should live by, or even that it is the most important. However, when communities make moral evaluations, it is important that these evaluations evolve from a continuous discussion and debate between various role-players in the community.

Another important characteristic that nourishes the community structure is that of respecting each other. Respect in addition to intelligence and tolerance, is probably the most essential quality, more especially for people working together for a common cause.¹⁰ A central tenet of Ubuntu is respect for the dignity and worth of every human being. This includes respecting others' opinions, beliefs, and cultures. Respect is a value and as a value, respect involves citizens' relationships with each other. Respect is an essential precondition for communication, for teamwork and for productivity: a vital tool for addressing communal problems. No institution can function effectively and efficiently, if mutual respect does not shape and inform its activities.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights also states that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and

fundamental freedoms.¹¹ Ubuntu emphasizes the notion of mutual understanding and the active appreciation of the value of human difference. It requires us to know and understand others within a multicultural environment.

Ubuntu philosophy is centered on complementarity. Complementarity centers on

10. Mabovula, "The Erosion of African Communal Values", 43

11. Mabovula, "The Erosion of African Communal Values", 40.

group power and support. This complementarity. This complementarity is what Ozumba and Chimakolam call *Nmekoka*. Literally, *Nmekoka* means that strength or power in its fullness is found in the group or achieved through group effort. The individual loses itself in the group.¹²

Ubuntu aligns with the principles of human rights, as it values the inherent worth and dignity of all individuals. It also encourages personal growth and development through positive interactions with others. It suggests that by uplifting others, one can uplift themselves.

Importance of Ubuntu Philosophy to the Nigeria Situation

Ubuntu as a philosophical and ethical concept that originates from African traditions, emphasizes the interconnectedness of all people and the importance of compassion, empathy, and mutual support in human interactions. However, before looking at the importance of ubuntu philosophy to the Nigeria situation, it is pertinent to conceptualize the Nigerian variant of Ubuntu, targeting

the ideas of Innocent Asouzu, and Alloy Ihuah. Innocent Asouzu captures that Africans are known for the dominant culture of sharing and communalism. This culture, is what he calls *Ibuanyidanda* *Ibuanyidanda* reflects African traditional spirit and ontology of complementarity, achieved through mutual relations, which defines our being. According to him:

Ibuanyidanda is a compound Igbo concept derived from three Igbo words: *ibu*, *anyi*, and *danda*. *Ibu* means load or task, *anyi* means not insurmountable for, and *danda* is a species of ants. As a concept, *ibuanyidanda* derives its meaning from the traditional Igbo complementary system of thought that explores the ants' (*danda*) capacity to perform

¹². G.O Ozumba and J.O. Chimakonam, *Njikoka Amaka: Further Discussions on the Philosophy of Integral Humanism*, Volume 2 (Calabar: 3rd Logic, 2014), 80. 252.

tasks seemingly beyond them by relying on the strength of their mutual dependence and interdependence.¹³

Asouzu employs it to mean no tasks are for human beings insurmountable when they complement their potentialities. The Igbo traditional ant (*danda*) can surmount the most difficult challenges, if and only if, they work in a harmonious complementary unified manner. For the traditional Igbo, without complementarity, human life would be unbearable isolated struggle that easily leads to self - abandonment. For anything to exist, the principle of complementarity holds that it must be in a mutual complementary relationship with other units, with which it shares a common framework.¹⁴

The implication of this principle, says Ukam, John Inah is that with sense of decency and universal humanism, all these have been and can be harvested within humanity's intellectual community for common sharing in the spirit of rob my back let me rob your back what the Erei in Ekoi linguistic group in Cross River State refers to as *ogbock ena irim irim ena ogbock*, that is complimentary reflection. This is not globalization but globalism or complementary reflection... the spirit of complimentary reflection of knowledge integration can equally be reasoned from the point of view of the power of the oppressed the only source of liberation for both the oppressed and the oppressors, a complete dialectics for change which from my point of view requires universal humanistic dialogue. It is the highest expression of the principle of humanistic ideal and complimentary reflection of knowledge

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13. Innocent I. Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda, New Complementary Ontology: Beyond WorldImmanetism, Ethnocentric Reduction and Impositions* (Germany: Lit Verlag, 2007), 252.
 14. Innocent I. Asouzu, "Ibuanyidanda and the Philosophy of Essence, *Filosofia Theoretica*, 1, no.1 (2011): 79-118.
 15. Ukam, John Inah, "Philosophy's Aim, Asouzu's Complimentary Reflection and the Basic Models of knowledge Integration *LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research* 17, no.2 (2020): 201

integration which is a categorical imperative...¹⁵ Similarly, Alloy Ihuah uses the principle of democratic humanism (*Ayatutu*), which is an African philosophy that promotes group mentality above that of the individual. In other words, it promotes individual human well-being among beings. Hence, Alloy Ihuah explains;

In Tiv ontology the individual is emptied of the “I” (insufficiency) into the group “they”. This the Tiv refer to as *Ayatutu* which simply refers to, seeking the whole from the units. The phrase *Ayatutu ka u no, ka se*) literary translated as: who am I, I am the we (sic). This concept defines the African principle of solidarity and a sense of hierarchical ordering of the African community in the context of the units and the whole. Thus, all that exist belong together and they are made manifest together in the service of humanity. Sociality is seen here as a dialogical ideal community that is characterized by what is described in western tradition as inter-subjectivity that accords primacy to the I in its interaction with the “You” (We). Understood here, the “I” and the “We” are absorbed as dialogical partners in the interiority of the Us.¹⁶

The informing idea here is that, through *Ayatutu*, an individual existence makes meaning, though, only to the extent that he or she connects with another member of the community. What this means is that, the individual member of the community is open and available to others, affirming of others. He does not feel threatened that others are able and good, based on a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing

16. Alloy Ihua, “Of Seeking the Whole from the Units: A Discourse Analysis of Aristotle's Essence, Asouzu's Ibuanyidanda and the Tiv *Ayatutu* Ontology” *APPON Philosophical Quarterly* 1 no.1 (2022): 106

that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.¹⁷

The Tiv *Ayatutu* ontology shares similar principles with the Igbo *Ibuanyidanda* complimentary principle. Ibuanyidanda ontology is a philosophy of integration, of unity in diversity and of seeking the whole from units, while *Ayatutu* ontology establishes a common bond between individuals and communities through which fellowship and relationships are established. For the Tiv therefore, the question *Ayatutu* ka-u-no? who is the I? is answered, *Ayatutu* Ka se (meaning, I is the we). These two principles aim at reorienting humanity to think the humanity of humanity as against the prevailing attitude of discrimination, stereotyping and polarization of humanity along the polar lines of the political, religious and ethnic divisions.

Imbibing the spirit of Ubuntu and other philosophies of complementarity will therefore help Nigeria and Nigerians in tackling the issues of tribalism, hatred, nepotism among others. In other words, when Nigerians start imbibing the spirit of brotherhood and love and as well see their fellow human beings as person, there will be tranquility, national growth and sustainable development. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has called Ubuntu 'the gift that Africa will give the world'... as Ubuntu promotes the idea that individuals should show compassion and empathy towards one another.¹⁸

It encourages people to understand and relate to the experiences and feelings of others. According to Professor Ramose, Ubuntu is at the root of African philosophy and being. The African tree of knowledge stems from the Ubuntu philosophy. Ubuntu is a wellspring that flows within African existence and epistemology in which the two aspects *Ubu* and *ntu* constitute a wholeness and oneness.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ihuah, "Of Seeking the Whole from the Units", I07.

¹⁸ Desmond Tutu on google.com accessed June 2023.

¹⁹ Dani W. Nabudere, "Ubuntu Philosophy.Memory and Reconciliation", www.google.com accessed August 2023.

When we see our society as Humane society; which is radically oriented towards life, there would be no need for violence and inhuman act. Any society that wants sustainable development must

imbibe the spirit of respect, multiculturalism, integrative and cultural humanism. Thus, Kevin Chaplin adds:

Multiculturalism teaches us to respect other cultures because we may not know what we can learn from other people whose views might be different from ours. That is why cultural diversity teaches us to even learn other people's languages. For reconciliation to occur in our country, we have to put our differences aside in order to rebuild the nation. People should learn to be conciliatory. The efforts of corporate cultural transformation must encourage acceptance of our differences and the discovery of our similarities, avoiding emphasizing differences.²⁰

Ubuntu helps in Conflict resolution. The principles of ubuntu stresses peaceful conflict resolution and reconciliation, hence paves way for dialogue and understanding rather than resorting to violence or hostility.

Nigeria is a heterogenous society and she experiences all manner of tribal wars and differences. Unity in diversity is very paramount and to achieve this togetherness, reconciliation with those "others" becomes a continuous necessity of being.

However, a growing rift between new structures and traditional values has seen the erosion of the spirit of Ubuntu, and made it difficult for people to interact openly in certain instances. If the concept of Ubuntu

20. Kevin Chaplin, "The Ubuntu Spirit in African Communities", available at www.google.com accessed on July 12, 2023

is consciously harnessed, it has the power to bring about increased harmony within society, promoting a new patriotism among the people of its nation.²¹

Ubuntu is essential for community building and development. According to Kevin Chaplin,

The concept of Ubuntu is crucial to community building for example, urban renewal in the ghetto or inner cities of the West as well as community development in rural and peri-urban situations in developing countries. It is universal because it can be applied to the challenge of empowering marginalized minorities...In order to fully realize the spirit of Ubuntu, it is crucial to engage members of our communities and the workplace in dialogue. This is the first step towards achieving a caring nation, with recognized democratic values and a social justice system that is based on equality, non-racism, non-sexism and human dignity.²²

A lovely old Chinese proverb says it all: When a man is at peace with himself, he will be at peace with his family. When the families are at peace there will be peace in the villages. When the villages are at peace there will be peace in the country. When all the countries are at peace there will be peace in the world.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Having made a philosophical of Ubuntu, it is evident that it is an African philosophy of existentialism. In other words, made an expose of the African concept of person through the lens of Ubuntu. This paper therefore is a clarion call to inculcate the

21. Chaplin, "The Ubuntu Spirit in African Communities",

22. Chaplin, "The Ubuntu Spirit in African Communities"

culture of brotherhood, tolerance and forgiveness among Nigerians. It also calls for unity and mutual co-operation among people who live in a particular area with honesty and reliability being important. Ubuntu philosophy is therefore an underlying principle and practice for governing Nigeria, her citizens and systems.

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