



## The Ubuntu Concept of Good Life

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This essay seeks to argue that Africa's unique contribution to the global concept of good life lies in her distinct social cohesion type of communitarianism. The title of this essay seems to suggest some kind of generalization regarding how people in Sub-Saharan Africa perceive good life. Though it is difficult to speak for all Bantu people because of the striking diversity in cultures and other aspects of life, at the same time, there are remarkable similarities, which make it possible to draw certain conclusions about the Bantu people. This essay will attempt to articulate such similarities.

Bantu people's way of living is guided by Ubuntu philosophy — which has its origins in humanist African philosophy, where the idea of community is one of the integral parts of society, a theory of shared humankind, togetherness — humanity, you and I.

The Bantu occupy vast patches of land in Sub-Saharan Africa. Some well-known Bantu tribes are the Kikuyu in Kenya, the Bemba in Zambia, Shona in Zimbabwe, the Sotho in the Republic of South Africa and Chewa in Malawi. Ubuntu is attributed to all the various groups of people who share this common descent and cultural heritage.

In Bantu philosophy, one is not attributed the title of a human person unless they live up to that expectation. Basically, this means to be human is not necessarily about the ontology of a person, per se, but rather to behave humanely in one's intersubjective relationships. Etymologically, there are two closely related words; Bantu and Ubuntu. Linguistically, both terms contain the stem “-ntu” which means personhood or humanness. Apparently, it is possible to alter slightly the sense of the word by changing the prefix. For example, by adding the prefix ‘Ba’ to the stem, the terminology means people in general. This is the level of ontological existence



Men and women working together to make manure

whereby because one is born of the human folk, they automatically deserve humane treatment.

By putting the prefix 'Ubu' in front of the same stem, the word acquires a new sense of having humanness in one's dispositions in the community. Bantu philosophy distinguishes human-like behavior from animal-like behavior. The former is characterized by altruism and self-giving to one's community. It also entails avoiding all detrimental acts to the human race. On the other hand, animal-like behavior is egoistic. Human beings are expected to be better than animals. As such, personhood is measured against the background of doing what is good for humanity and never just by virtue of being born as a human being. That is why Desmond Tutu, argues that in Africa when we want to praise someone for exhibiting the highest degree of humanness, we say: 'Yu u nobuntu' meaning 'this one is a person'<sup>1</sup>. Nierkerk's line of thought<sup>2</sup> also resonates well with Tutu's when he says that the Nguni expression 'Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' means one is a person through others. In fact, the earliest African scholar to have articulated this assertion of Ubuntu is Mbiti. He said in Africa, the guiding principle of all humane behavior is: 'I am because we are and because we are therefore I am'<sup>3</sup>.

Comparatively, Descartes in his famous phrase 'I think, therefore I am' seems to suggest that being incapable of self-reflection means not existing. The Cartesian concept of human existence appears contradictory to that of Ubuntu because it dwells on a

person's self-consciousness to prove his existence. On the contrary, in Ubuntu, each human being's personhood is essentially expressed through interacting with other people in a manner that promotes everybody's welfare. That is why in Ubuntu it is correct to say that there is *no me without you*. Barbara Nussbaum<sup>4</sup> excellently expresses this fact about Ubuntu communalism in her three phrases: 'Your pain is my pain, my wealth is your wealth and your salvation is my salvation'. It would not be wrong for one to add that in Ubuntu 'your happiness and sorrows are mine too'.

However, communalism of African people does not mean the good or happiness of the individual is subordinated to that of the community<sup>5</sup>. Rather, by pursuing the communal good, the individual pursues his or her own good. To that extent, Ubuntu communalism is unlike Marxist collectivism (cultural value that is demonstrated by importance on cohesiveness among individuals and prioritization of the group over self).

Unlike Stoic and Aristotelian jurisprudence, which emphasized mastery of personal desires of the self as a way to attain eudemonia (from Greek language which means happiness but it could also mean good life in this context). Ubuntu's normative philosophy is formulated on the outward basis of social harmony. The essence of Ubuntu morality lies in the moral paradigm: 'An action is right just in so far as it produces harmony and reduces discord; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to develop the community'<sup>6</sup>.

Although, social harmony appears to be the key in achieving happiness or good life among the Bantu, Ubuntu philosophy is not oblivious to the multifaceted nature of human life. Every living human being relates on three levels; firstly, to people who are presently living. Secondly, every living human being relates to the natural surroundings. Lastly, there are ancestors who are called the 'living-dead' among the Bantu. The next three paragraphs examine the connection between good life and these three interactions.

As already alluded to before, in Ubuntu there is a kinship both among and between indigenous people, which creates a family atmosphere through a kind of philosophical affinity. In this regard, Ubuntu is in tandem with the global process of creating global citizens because it is a philosophy that respects all human beings regardless of race, tribe and other statuses. Historians have documented how the indigenous people in Africa warmly welcomed white settlers at the dawn of colonialism and

evangelization. They were given land, food, water and other bodily necessities. Such an affinity is inspired by a spirit of sharing life sustaining physical and psycho-social needs such as food, clothes, housing, water, land, security and others. Having good relations with other human beings can and in fact does ensure that not only personal basic needs are met but also the communal ones. If someone in a village has food, which he is not willing to share with others, especially the poor, orphans, widows, the disabled and the sick, then he could be called a wizard. Being labeled a witch or wizard does not always mean that one practices the so-called 'black magic'. The cost, which could come with this labeling of witch or wizard, is social exclusion. A selfish individual isolates himself from the community. The negative effects are self-evident when such an individual has a wedding or funeral ceremony. Community members do not render all the necessary support, as they would have done if the person were humane. So, to sum it up, on this aspect of interpersonal relationships, good life entails contributing to one's community in both good and bad times.

The second aspect of human life, which also contributes greatly to the measure of good life, is interaction with nature. A healthy natural environment provides humanity with the resources, which sustain both plant and animal life forms. These are the two major sources of food for human beings. Living in harmony with nature is something that is inevitable because people's lives are wholly dependent on natural forces such as rains, winds and sunshine. Most indigenous societies are agrarian. This means their survival is dependent on the balance of natural forces. When these forces are in good balance, then life is secure. Prolonged durations of rain or dry spells are a catastrophe. Being agrarian is living an unpredictable life because forces of nature too are. However, harmony with nature guarantees good life for human beings because when cared for properly the earth is better able to support all forms of life, including that of mankind. That is why the Bantu concept of good life inexorably includes physical needs because no one can be happy without having them. Paradoxically, modernity has brought tarmac roads, electricity, tap water and other technological advances but sometimes these alienate certain members of the populations thereby robbing them of their happiness. The consequences of environmental degradation are natural disasters like floods, famines, dry spells and hurricanes. How can man be happy





with these natural disasters threatening human lives and their property?

Lastly, Bantu people are aware of the importance of respecting ancestral spirits. This is a metaphysical dimension of Bantu life. Though dead, ancestors are living. Indigenous Africans are conscious that their survival on earth also depends on fulfilling the wishes of those who have already gone ahead. Even in death, it is believed that ancestors can deliver prosperity or disasters to their offspring. Misfortunes in one's life could come from disobeying orders or the wishes of the ancestors. Similarly, pleasing the ancestors can also attract fortunes.

In conclusion, happiness in the life of a Bantu emanates from a harmonious life with neighbors, Mother Earth and the ancestral world.

### Notes

1. Desmond Tutu. 1999. *No Future Without Forgiveness*. London: Rider.
2. J. Nierkerk. 2013. "Ubuntu and Moral Value". (Doctoral thesis. Republic of South Africa: University of Witwatersrand). <<http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/jspui/bitstream/10539/13638/2/Ubuntu%20and%20Moral%20Value%20-%20Final%20Draft%20including%20Corrections.pdf>>.
3. J. S. Mbiti. 1991. "African Religions and Philosophy". England: Heinemann Publishers, 1991.
4. B. Nussbaum. "African culture and ubuntu: Reflections of a South African in America". *World Business Academy-Rekindling the Human Spirit in Business-Perspectives*. Volume 17, Issue 1. (2003), p. 2.

5. David Lutz. 2009. "African Ubuntu Philosophy and Global Management". *Journal of Business Ethics*, 84. pp. 313–328. <[www.researchgate.net/publication/226492645\\_African\\_Ubuntu\\_Philosophy\\_and\\_Global\\_Management](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/226492645_African_Ubuntu_Philosophy_and_Global_Management)>.
6. T. Metz. 2007. "Toward an African Moral Theory". *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 15. pp. 321–341. < <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2007.00280.x/full#fn55>>.



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Louis Zulu is a teacher of languages and humanities in Malawi. He has over 16 years work experience teaching adolescents in public schools. He is presently pursuing a Master's degree in Philosophy at the University of Malawi. He volunteers as the Coordinator of LEAD project and Aware and Fair. In his work, he aims at agitating school going youths to be drivers of the change they want to see in the world.