

CHAPTER VI

HUMAN NATURE/IDENTITY: THE UBUNTU WORLDVIEW AND BEYOND

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This paper is about the understanding of human nature and identity in the African context called Ubuntu. First, I will explain the meaning of the Ubuntu worldview. Following this I present the notion of Nature, and Human Nature, as can be culled from the mythologies of origin of the Bantu people of Eastern Africa. Kenya has been particularly chosen because the philosopher should begin her reflections with her own life experience. My experience is Kenyan. I then attempt to identify commonalities and divergences between the African, Ubuntu understanding of human nature and those of classic and contemporary realism in Philosophical Anthropology in the belief that “a ‘philosophy of man’ is something altogether distinct from an expression of merely personal standpoint or value system”.¹ Hence Seneca’s saying: “The truth is no one’s property.”² I conclude by highlighting the need for common ground regarding the essentials of human nature for any possible moral discourse within the whole idea of the common good, human dignity, and the respect of human rights.

For the framework of the paper I follow two Ganda sayings. The first one says: No culture is so poor that it cannot teach anything positive to other cultures. Put in KiGanda: *Omuggo oguli ewa mulirwano, tegutta musota guli mu nju yo*,³ literally translated as: “A stick in your neighbor’s house can never kill a snake in your house.” The second saying encourages openness: “no culture is so perfect that it cannot learn from other cultures” – “*Ama gezi muliro, bwe guzikira ewuwo ogunona ewa munno*”, literally translated as: “Wisdom is like fire, when it is extinguished in your home, you get it from the neighbor”⁴

¹ Eric Voegelin, *The In-Between of Human Life: Conversations with Eric Voegelin*. Edited and with introduction by R. Eric O’Connor (Montreal: Thomas More Institute, 1980), p. 100.

² Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis: A History of the Idea of Nature* (Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 172.

³ KiGanda is a language of the Bantu cluster of languages in Uganda.

⁴ Cf. J.M. Kanyandago, *Law and Public Morality in Africa: Legal, Philosophical and Cultural Issues*.

THE CLAIM OF UBUNTU AS REPRESENTATIVE OF AFRICAN CULTURES

Africa is the second largest continent on earth.⁵ It is estimated that the United States, China, India, New Zealand, together with Europe from the Atlantic to Moscow, and much of South America, could all fit within the African coastline.⁶ Geologically it is considered to be the Earth's oldest and most enduring land mass of which ninety-seven percent has been in place and stable for 300 to 550 million years; some parts for as much as 3.6 million years.⁷

Genetic, paleontological, and linguistic evidence indicate that the first 'anatomically humans' evolved in Africa, and from Africa migrated to other continents. The out of Africa migrations of the first anatomically humans are known to have occurred several times, some as late as 100,000 years ago. In the opinion of Templeton, the result was the global replacement and genetic extinction of non-modern human populations by anatomically modern humans.⁸ According to him, the genetic reading is that post '*homo erectus*' migrations, there arises deeper human lineages all over the world.⁹ This leads one to conclude that genetically every human being alive today carries the mtDNA of just one African woman "our common mother."¹⁰ A further implication is that the DNA of that woman must have steadily become dominant as some material lineages disappeared with each succeeding generation. To a large extent, and for a philosopher, this appears to be merely a supposition, but, for lack of better evidence of the origin of man, it translates to a common origin of all human beings as African.

Owing perhaps to her ancient geographical history, the continent has always displayed a fascinating and inspiring interplay between man and man and between man and nature. Yet, despite being supposedly the place of the origin of life, and a continent richly endowed with minerals, wildlife and vegetation, people and animals have always moved around within and outside the continent. More intriguing still is the fact that while the out of Africa populations are said to have increased from about just hundreds to over 200 million in about 100,000 years, by about 1500 AD the whole continent is estimated to have had no more than 47 million people. The myriad of possible reasons to explain those movements, migrations and

⁵ John Reader, *Africa. A Biography of a Continent* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), p. 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Reader, pp. 9-10.

⁸ Alan R. Templeton, "Out of Africa Again and Again," *Nature*, 416 (2002) pp. 45-51; Cf. also Reader, p. 94

⁹ Templeton, p.45.

¹⁰ A.C. Wilson, et al 1987, "Mitochondrial Clans and the Age of our Common Mother". Cf. *Reader* (1998), p. 95.

displacements fall outside the scope of this paper. However, one can surmise that among them could be what Voltaire is cited, to have once said: that, two basic factors have always beset the human condition, whether in Africa, or anywhere else. These are, firstly, the harms to the human condition that arise out of the acts of nature, such as earthquakes, floods, fires, drought, among others. Secondly, there are the much more pernicious harms that human beings cause to other human beings.¹¹ This has been absolutely true of Africa if one considers the forced migrations of African people as slaves, on one hand, as well as the willful migrations and emigrations owing to other factors, including the search for greener pastures owing to climatic extremes.

The mention of these movements and migrations may seem unusual in a philosophy paper, but they have much relevance for the topic this paper, which purports to discuss the understanding of human nature and identity, from an African perspective. Part of the inspiration for it has been precisely those movements. Another source of the inspiration has been what Pope Paul VI, said on the subject:

Recent ethnic history of the peoples of Africa, though lacking in written documents, is seen to be very complex, yet rich in spiritual, social and individual experience, much worthy of further analysis research. Many customs and rites, once considered to be strange, are seen today, in the light of ethnological science, as integral parts of various social systems, worthy of study and commanding respect.¹²

A third source of inspiration for the content of this paper has been the position, first adduced and defended by the late Henry Odera Orika, that, any philosophical study of any topic in Africa needs to be approached under one or other of the various philosophical approaches.¹³ One such approach is hermeneutical, whereby the scholar attempts to cull out the philosophical meaning from African wisdom, often hidden in myths, religions, sayings, songs, and poetry. The ever disturbing question however, is where to start. Africa, we have seen, is an enormous continent with varying races and cultures. Can one then really write something and claim it to be representative of the whole continent? If one was to do so without the danger of extrapolation, the answer is obviously in the negative. Nonetheless, recent studies by scholars of modern Africa show that despite there being many 'Africas', as regards culture and

¹¹ Cf. Sisela Bok, *In the Great Conversation* (Washington: Aspen Publications, 2006), p. 60.

¹² Pope Paul VI. Message to Africa, for the Promotion of the Religious, Civil and Social Good of the Continent.

¹³ Cf. G.M. Presbey, "The Wisdom of African Sages," In *New Political Science*, Volume 21, November 1 (1999), pp. 89-102.

human physical features, it is still possible to trace some fundamental commonalities among the African people; at least among the African people of the last two millennia. In recent years, these commonalities have occupied an ongoing debate particularly among political scientists, philosophers and theologians. Many are in agreement that some common traits of culture do exist among most African people. That commonality today goes by the name of Ubuntu, a Bantu word whose importance I shall explain.

Just as scientists have used genetics to confirm the fossil evidence of an African origin of *homo sapiens*, similarly linguists have shown that the most ancient surviving languages are rooted in Africa and, on the basis of shared words and linguistic structure, they conclude that the world's several languages are grouped into twenty or so linguistic families. Further research indicates that of these there are four groups, all African, which bear little relationship with all the rest. These groups are the *Niger-Congo* group or Bantu languages, the *Nilo-Saharan* group (spoken mostly by pastoralists groups like the Maasai), *Afro-Asiatic* languages, used particularly in Ethiopia & North Africa, and the *Khoisan* spoken mostly by the San (or Bushmen) of South Africa.¹⁴ A most fascinating thing is that all four groups are represented in Eastern Africa. Of all the four, however, the most widely spread is the Niger-Congo group or **Bantu**. The term Bantu was coined by a German philologist of the name Wilhelm Brek in the 19th century.¹⁵ In itself, it has no ethnic or cultural connotation. It is simply, and exclusively, a linguistic label of African languages and dialects among which the word-stem **ntu**, meaning "something," and is always used for persons, is common. The term *ubuntu* derives from the sub-Bantu group of languages spoken in *Southern Africa* called Nguni. It includes such languages as the Zulu, Xhosa, Swati, Phuti, and the Ndebele among others, and which have phonological variants in the wider Niger-Congo group.

The importance of the Bantu for our topic is the concept of "ntu" which runs through phonological traits of what are otherwise very diverse people culturally. This paper, nevertheless, concentrates on the East African people with examples taken mainly from Kenya, which is better known to the author. The interesting thing regarding the Bantu phonological similarities is the concept of **ntu** as used in these cluster of languages. **Ntu** refers to a particular kind of "something" and that something is presented as having various dimensions: the "human," is at once the existent man or woman, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, at another level, human in the sense of humanness understood as something deeper in a person which makes him or her relate in a certain way with all other people. An examination of the words used by various people from East and Central Africa to say, for instance, 'human', 'humanness' and 'humane', show

¹⁴ Cf. *Reader*, pp. 109-110.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

them all to bear *ntu*. For the Kikuyu of Kenya the word '*mundu*', *mundu* means human being, while *umundu*' means the humanness in human being. Similarly, the Meru, also of Kenya say '*muntu*' and '*imuntu*' respectively, to render the human and humanness. The Sukuma of Tanzania say '*bumuntu*', while the Tsonga, also of Tanzania and Malawi say, '*vumuntu*'. The Haya, of Bukoba region near Lake Victoria, say '*umuntu*' for human being, and further inland in Central Africa, they say *bomoto* in KiBobangi and '*gimuntu*' in kiKongo (Congo).¹⁶

This sketchy analysis of language in three African regions, seems sufficient to confirm that, despite having awesome diversity among themselves, many African cultures display a phonological likeness that can only be explained as emerging from a common root in the past. The analysis of those similarities reveals them to be the cornerstone of African thought and moral life, which political scientists, philosophers and theologians believe to have significant importance in African research. Such is the case with the concept of Ubuntu. An analysis of the term shows it to consist of 'two words in one': a prefix *ubu-* and the stem *ntu-*, evoking a dialectical relationship of being and becoming. Without attempting any metaphysical combination of the two concepts, we have an example from Haya language (Tanzania). To say of a person that he has desirable *pneumatic* human qualities, they say: *Umuntu aina Ubu-ntu*. Thus, *Ubu-* and *ntu-* are seen to be a dynamic interplay between the verb 'to-be', and the noun depicting the entity that has that quality. That entity is always 'human'.¹⁷ Having settled the question of **ntu** among the Bantu, and in the wider sense, among African cultures, we shall now look at the understanding of nature and of human nature, and identify them in the *Ubuntu* cultures.

THE CONCEPT OF NATURE

Bantu languages generally do not have a word that can translate directly, or exactly, to the English term "nature". Neither is there evidence of African traditions having ever searched for a single term for it in the manner, for instance, that we find Thales, the Pythagoreans, and other early philosophers seeking the *arché* of all things, nor in the manner that led Heraclitus to make the aphorism (*phusi krustheai philei*) 'Nature loves to hide'. But, on the other hand, the history of philosophy shows this to have been something very unique of the Greeks that gave them a preeminent position in classical philosophical quest. For the Bantu speakers, just like

¹⁶ Cf. David A. McDonald, "Ubuntu Bashing: the Marketisation of 'African Values'" (South Africa). *Review of African Political Economy*, 37:124, 139-152 online version (Accessed November 8, 2010).

¹⁷ Cf. R.J. Khoza, *Let Africa Lead: African Transformational Leadership for 21st Century Business* (Johannesburg: Venzutu, 2006), p. 6 no. 36.

for many other peoples of the world, 'Nature', was simply anything, known, or believed to be there, and containing within it hidden mysteries. Thus, African people respected it with the common sense similar to Plato's, who Hadot describes as one who "refuses to discuss things that transcend human beings, because they are inaccessible to their investigative powers, and, on the other hand, have no importance for them, since the only things that must interest them is the conduct of moral or political life".¹⁸

For an African notion of 'human nature and identity,' therefore, the place to look is in their usage in other forms such as religious beliefs and myths of creation, proverbs and sayings, songs and dance, as well as from traditional customs regarding the treatment of the environment. This is no mean task, especially when one considers that despite the linguistic commonalities previously mentioned, African does not operate on a monolithic cultural or religious pattern. The starting point is to pick out certain myths and try to separate the incidental from the believable. In the process, one has to bear in mind that, every philosophical reflection, including that of the most highly reputed philosophers, is never dogmatically final regarding the truth of anything. A typical characteristic of philosophy is that it should not be dogmatic. If this is so of all philosophical truths, it is much more so of the concept of 'nature' and of its origin.

The human mind, all the way from Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel and all the way to our day, has never had the power to tell us that it has captured the whole truth. The implication thereby is that, philosophical conclusions are no more than sophisticated myths, for, as Voegelin rightly explains: "Only a little inner reflection is required, however, to surmise that man is not sufficient unto himself, but is conscious of participating in an order extending both in time and space."¹⁹

Myth is born of this spirit. It arises from the effort of the mind in quest for an explanation. It emerges as "a technique of imputing a ground to an object of experience, the search for the origin, a quest for some explanation of why nature and natural things behave the way they do. They are in short, the operation of an imaginative consciousness which spontaneously conceives the world and man in the form of persons and events having symbolic meaning".²⁰ Like in ancient Greece as recounted by Homer and Hesiod, myths, short stories and songs are constant in African traditions and education, and in a similar manner to how ancient Greek philosophy borrowed certain concepts from the Homeric epic stories, a lot of the philosophy in Africa has to start by borrowing from African myths. This is clear if we remember, with the German philosopher, Robert Spaemann, that

¹⁸ Hadot, p. 92.

¹⁹ Voegelin, *In-Between-of Human Life*, p.100.

²⁰ George F. McLean, *Beyond Modernity: The Recovery of Person and Community in Global Times* (Washington: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2010), p. 86.

many commonly used philosophical concepts such as *Eudaimonia* are of mythological origin.²¹

We take it then that, African myths of origin are simply unsophisticated philosophy, or ways to explain nature's mystery, the mystery of existence and non-existence, of the being and becoming of things. Most African traditions viewed 'nature' with sacred awe. That awe and the ensuing respect for nature, sprung both from its incomprehensibility as well as from the knowledge that it was the absolute key to the solution of most problems of the human condition and its needs. The sun and rain, especially necessary for life and growth, food for man and beast, and the warmth that is crucial for people health, were somehow known to be the doings of nature. 'Nature' is also known to be capable of unleashing much harm, punitive to the human condition; hence, drought, floods, earthquakes, wild fires, disease do not just happen, they have a meaning.

Most African communities believed that such occurrences manifest some displeasure on the part of God. The relation between man and nature was therefore important, and it was manifested in different ways. For example, 'nature' was generally not disturbed unless there was sufficient reason to do so: for instance, tilling land for agricultural purposes, use of minerals and tress for weaponry, clothing, and shelter. Beyond that, interference in nature was seen to be irreverent, a sign of disrespect or impiety, capable of awakening its wrath. The distinguishing factor between 'need' and 'abuse' was the question of 'necessity', or the manner in which such acts would impinge on people's daily lives. To this general rule there was however, one unspoken exception: that of 'medicine' and 'art' which in some cases were not distinguishable, because the medicine-man had to use certain artistic paraphernalia. Such paraphernalia were variously interpreted as desire to imitate the beautiful or aesthetics, or as medium to communicate with the occult, and medicine itself as dispensation of the healing power contained in nature.

The African traditional practice of medicine is one clear indication of how "a few human beings have the courage to want to tap, manipulate and use it (nature), such as the medicine-men, witches, priests and rainmakers, some for the good and others for the ill of their communities."²² In the minds of these daring Africans, one can see and make alive the description of the cause of magic given by Hadot: "belief that natural phenomena are brought about by invisible powers, gods or demons, and it is therefore possible to modify natural phenomena by forcing the god or demon to do what one wants to accomplish."²³

²¹ R. Spaemann, *Happiness and Benevolence* (Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), p. 9.

²² John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1969), p. 16.

²³ Hadot, p. 107.

The art consisted mostly of sculptures, face masks, headdress, painting of the human body, and dance movements imitating animals. The imitation of animal forms in head gear and clothing and skins, the use of animal sounds for certain ceremonies, totems, etc. were generally meant as expressions of the admiration of the aesthetic aspects of nature. However, at other times they meant just the opposite: that is to say, they were used as a facility to communicate with the occult or to create fear.

Much of what Hadot, in *The Veil of Isis*, observes regarding other ancient cultures to some extent holds true in Africa. For example, he says: “the choices available for the investigation of nature were guided by the way relations between men and nature was represented; that is to say, between nature and human activity. That choice was oriented by the way the image of the ‘secrets of nature’ was perceived...” For example, “if man feels nature to be an enemy, hostile and jealous, which resists him by hiding its secrets, there will then be opposition between nature and human art, based on human reason and will.

“Man will seek, through technology, to affirm his power, domination, and rights over nature.”²⁴ This observation has much significance for Africa’s attitude to nature. It also evokes the great difference between the African general attitude to nature as contrasted to that of the Western cultures. Whereas Western thinkers are more proactive, more promethean in their determination to wrest out Nature’s ‘secrets’, in order to dominate and exploit her, Africa is slower to do so on account of her traditional reverence for it. Consequently, in this era of globalization, this fact is only too evident in the zeal with which non-African investors, especially Western, exploit man and land.

The traditional African approach to nature was more in line with Hadot’s explanation that “scientific knowledge, for the sake of knowing only was not of much interest since it could not really alter people lived experience. His example is “the Copernican Revolution that the earth revolves round the sun, although this knowledge transformed the theoretical discourse of scientists and philosophers, it did not, in fact alter anything in the line of lived experience”. In like mindedness, for the African worldview, the respect for nature is hinged onto a pragmatic sense. In this era of globalization, this orpheic, or sacral attitude towards nature has not helped Africa advance technologically. We have seen the results. Africa’s modesty’s towards nature, her awe and respect for it, has meant lagging behind in economic development. While people from different cultures, foreigners in a sense, create immense wealth from African natural resources, we in Africa are often left to wonder how it is that they are able to do it, almost as soon as they land in the continent. This is not to say that African people were not curious or desirous of discovering what lies beneath the appearances, the ‘secrets of nature’. Studies of African Traditional Religious (ATRs) have documented abundant myths of origin

²⁴ Hadot, p. 92.

from different African cultures. If we accept myth to come from the effort to explain those aspects of daily experience that perplex us, and from which a story is construed and told about the origin of something, then Africa is replete with such efforts.

In the traditions where myths are told, there is usually no uniform credibility. Some, for instance those which try to explain deep mysteries like the origin of man, have a higher range of acceptance. Others are told simply for the sake of their moral lesson. An example of the latter would be stories such as those which are told regarding some animals' behavior: why the hyena's hind legs are short or the reason for its perpetual nocturnal laughter; the peculiar eyes of the chameleon which can make a 180° scan of its surroundings, and its hesitant walk; the apparently cunning of the hare, and the mishap that led to the cracked tortoise shell. These are less credible and are told to transmit some lesson.

As we have seen, not all myths have the same category of importance. Those of the origin of the world and of man (humans) are imputed greater credibility than others. There are, according to ATR scholars, some African societies whose myths of origin assume the existence of the world to have always been there from the beginning, but they came from. Assuming the world's (universe, nature) existence, they immediately start on the origin of man (humans) in it.²⁵ Others place the origin of the heavens, that is to say, everything that is not the earth or the world, (in Kiswahili *mbingu* or *mbinguni*²⁶), as preceding that of the earth. In all of them however, things (Nature), are definitely understood to have been created by some transcendent power, a force that is different from what it created. The order of the appearance of things of nature is hardly ever referred to.²⁷ Mbiti's claims that in his research he has actually been able to trace in the myths of some societies, an ontological hierarchy in the creation, in which some things are in a higher mode of being than others, or exist in a descending order: God/ spirits/ humans/ animals and plants/ phenomena and objects without biological life". Thus, "the existence force ('life' for lack of a better word) that resides in a stone is known to be ontologically lower than that of a plant, and plants than animals, and animals than humans."²⁸ This claim seems to be congruent with George McLean's explanation of the role of myths. He says: "myths constitute a rational, though not critical inquiry. It is not critical because they do not state things by their proper names... Nevertheless, their thought content is rational and coordinated."²⁹

²⁵ Mbiti, pp. 39-41.

²⁶ Lingua Franca spoken in East Africa and by some societies in Rwanda, Burundi and Congo.

²⁷ Mbiti, p. 40.

²⁸ Mbiti, p.16.

²⁹ McLean, p. 87.

Mbiti's observation that the myths of origin in some African societies speak of a hierarchical order among the existents becomes the first step in the search for the place of, and the nature of *humans* within the broader scope of Nature. His finding is that "in the broadest sense of the word, 'nature' is not an empty impersonal object or phenomenon: it is filled with religious significance... The 'natural objects and phenomena... manifest him and they His being and presence..." The invisible world presses hard upon the visible: one speaks to the other, and Africans "see" that invisible universe when they look at, hear or feel the visible and tangible world",³⁰ even though in different degrees, and through different manifestations. This pervading presence of creator/creature underlies most African traditional respect for nature. Consequently, ATR scholars have found that a high status is given to the sun and moon. Among the Galla people of Ethiopia for example, the sun is said to be God's eye and the same for the Balese of the Congo who call it God's right eye and the moon his left eye. The same thought pattern can be found in Zambia where the sun is considered to be symbolic of God's eternity.³¹ Rain is another natural gift greatly valued in Africa. So valued is it that some African societies use the same cognate for both God and rain. In all societies, nevertheless, rain is always received as a sign of God's Providence and care for humanity.³²

This respect and sometimes relation of objects with the creating power have not, generally, been equivalent to pantheism. Of this ATR scholars say that pantheism and panentheism are "not appropriate terms to use as a description of African appreciation of the evidence of God's action in nature, because there is at the same time, an ontological hierarchy in which some things are understood to be in a higher mode of being than others".³³

Definitely, in Eastern Africa, and by extension, among most Bantu ethnic groups, nature is never identified with God or with natural things such as trees, birds, other animals, soil, etc. What is true of these societies is that some objects are recognized as having greater closeness or of being favorites with the divine being. Among the Kikuyu of Kenya, for instance, some mountains and hills, certain trees, or certain places are also considered more sacred than others. One can mention *Mūkūrũeini wa Gathanga*, a grove in a place called Mūrang'a in Central Kenya, where Kikuyu mythology relates that God fashioned the first man, Gīkūyũ and his wife, Mūmbi. Significantly, the term Mūmbi, means 'creator'; thus Mūmbi is assumed to be the mother of all human beings except her husband, Gīkūyũ. The couple, continues the myth, offered sacrifice to God under a sacred tree called *Mūgumo*, member of the *ficus* species,

³⁰ Mbiti, pp. 56-57.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 47, 52.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

which, to this day, is revered as a traditional tree even though the myth is no longer sustained.³⁴

Similarly, Mt. Kenya, whose caps are perpetually covered with snow, was revered by the Kikuyu as God's throne from where He rules the universe. The surrounding mountains were subsequently called his foot stools. Those are Nyandarūa (Aberdare ranges) to the west of Mt Kenya, Kīambirūirū (Mt. Ol Doinyo Sabuk) to the East, and Kīanjahī (Ng'ong Hills) to the South, thereby dominating the whole known country.³⁵ The interpretation here is that God is master of the whole of nature. Likewise, Ngai, Enkai, Mūrungu, all of them names of the divinity mean more or less the same thing, the giver or distributor of life and goods. Among those goods is of course the good of the knowledge of hidden things. These hidden things are the prerogative of some special people such as the seers and the sages. Ordinary people share a measure of that wisdom through experience acquired after years of participation in the councils of elders or Kīama to which entry is absolutely restricted. The members, Athuri get this practical wisdom in a manner much like the description of *phronesis* in Aristotle.

A variant set of myths among the Kisii Nyanza of Western Kenya, and the Kikuyu, of Central Kenya, both Bantu, but of very different cultural practices, tell of their origins in Misri (Egypt), from where they came down to central and Eastern Africa along the River Nile. The Kikuyu version of the myth explains how they settled around the skirts of Mt. Kenya, while the Kisii and other related groups continued westwards towards the shores of Lake Victoria. However, in these tales, no further light is shed as to how man first appeared in Misri.

Politically, some myths tell of a time when women headed the family institution and society with man subject to her. In a manner reminiscent of the Hobbesian Social Contract, men rebelled and made a pact to overthrow women's leadership at their weakest moment: pregnancy. All these stories are indicative of the quest for meaning and explanation. That these myths exist confirms that the natural intellectual curiosity which is part of the human condition is perfectly compatible with an attitude of awe and respect for nature. Awe and respect do not mean annihilation or obliteration of the human spirit.

Socially and economically, the awe and respect for the natural is not only deeply felt but also abided with in practical terms. Any mysterious harm that people have to suffer, coming either from nature or from other people is ultimately taken to have a meaning. Hence, it is not unusual to find, when tragedy occurs, that among Swahili speakers, just

³⁴ The mīgumo tree grows to gigantic dimensions, projecting its roots over a large territory around it, but it starts off as a parasite on other trees. It is possible that the mystery of its origin may have had something to do with it being considered a sacred tree or some sort of altar.

³⁵ It is worthy of note that the Bible does speak of a mountain as God's throne and the earth as his foot stool.

one word is sufficient to express sympathy. That word is '*pole*', which can be interpreted as: 'sorry that this happened', to which, in normal circumstances, the response is: '*Shauri ya Mungu*',³⁶ freely interpreted as, 'it's God's doing', or 'God knows why'. In like manner, indigence or a general lack of means is viewed as '*Hakuna matata*', loosely translatable to: '*don't worry, be happy*', as in Louis Armstrong's song. These two phrases sum up the African people pneumatically, or their *Ubuntu*. Despite shortages and suffering, there is a deep belief in the fact that one should keep a positive sense of life while trying to overcome the situation. African happiness is thus, not totally immersed in possessions or their accumulation. Most *Ubuntu* scholars are consistent that basically the African worldview lies in this: in the recognition and attitude to life that places much more value in non-material goods and particularly on the humanity of every person. For example, Shepherd Shonhiwa says: "African life emphasizes humanity and relationships over material wealth,"³⁷ and Mbigi states, "The hallmark of Afrocentric philosophy is about being a good community member. It is also about living and enjoying life rather than the acquisition of the material creature comforts. Hence, he emphasizes that, "the supernatural impacts on the general attitudes of African people to life."³⁸ Unfortunately, this deeply African worldview is quickly changing with globalization.

This same African attitude to life has at times been the source of much scorn for the African people, with the convoluted and misconstrued idea by Westerners, that it is indicative of insensibility, indifference or just simplemindedness. What such people fail to grasp is the real transcendent nature of the spirit which drives Africans' whole approach to daily life and experience.

'NTU' AS BASIS OF HUMAN NATURE AND IDENTITY: DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS

We now enter into a brief analysis of the 'human' (n-tu) as understood among the Bantu. At the level of action and interpersonal relations, one is not a person until they have *Ubuntu*. This implies various dimensions of the understanding of human being. At the initial level, 'ntu' is the essence of human, of that which is common to many as contrasted to **n-tu** as an entity or individual: '*mtu*', '*mundu*', '*omuntu*', '*umuntu*' etc. irrespective of gender. **Ntu** at this dimension explains why we can affirm of many that they are of a common stock, and not necessarily as African, European,

³⁶ Literally, "it is God's doing." Real meaning: if God has willed it, who are we to question it?

³⁷ S. Shonhiwa, *The Effective Cross-Cultural Manager: A Guide for Business Leaders in Africa* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2006), p. 6.

³⁸ Lovemore Mbigi and Jenny Maree, *Ubuntu: The Spirit of African Transformation Management* (Randburg: Knowres, 2005), p. 93.

American or Asian, but simply as people; human beings. The Kiswahili morphology expresses this through the classifications of nouns whereby of the 8 classes to which all nouns belong, the **M**-class in (singular) and **Wa** in plural is reserved mostly for human beings. In the singular format the prefix of a noun belonging to this class is either M, e.g. Mtu (s) or W e.g. Watu

From the general approach of human to human, what stands out is the fact that the most important thing to be considered with regard to 'ntu' is that one is a human being. In traditional African cultures therefore, all people are welcome; welcome simply because they are 'watu'. The majority of African philosophers now agree that a significant element of *Ubuntu* cultures is that it lends itself to a *communal* and traditional lifestyle in which every person is their neighbor's keeper. It also means that the humanity of one is caught up, or inextricably bound up with, in that of others, that as humans people belong together in a bundle of life. In Mbigi's description, "I cannot separate my humanity from the humanity of those around me."³⁹ Thus *Ubuntu* wisdom and philosophy distinguishes between an individual existence of the self and the simultaneous existence of other persons,⁴⁰ yet affirms that one only becomes fully human to the extent that he or she is included in *relationships* with others.⁴¹

This is the key underlying African hospitality for example. Every visitor is important and must be shown due hospitality. Traditional African cultures did not, as general rule, conceive of such amenities as inns, motels, restaurants, hotels. A traveler knew that wherever dusk caught him, he could always go in to lodge in the nearest home and that he would be well received; an exception to this rule was known witches. Behind that hospitality was the belief that every human being is valuable in him or herself individually. The value of human life in every other human being was expressed through generosity and magnanimity to the stranger. Hence, hospitality formed an important aspect of the education of young people. A Kiswahili poem poignantly depicts this teaching:

Mgeni siku ya kwanza, mkaribishe mgeni, mpe mchele na panza, mtilie kifuani Mgeni siku ya pili, mpe ziwa na samli, mahaba yakizidia, mzi die mgeni.

This is just one of the eight stanzas which make up the poem. Among other things the poem says: On the first day with your guest 'First

³⁹ L. Mbigi, *The Spirit of African Leadership* (Randburg: Knowres, 2005), p. 69.

⁴⁰ Fred Luthans, René Van Wyk and Fred O. Walumbwa, "Recognition and Development of Hope for South African Organizational Leaders," in *The Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 6 (2004), p. 515.

⁴¹ Augustine Shutte, *Ubuntu: An Ethic for the New South Africa* (Cape Town: Cluster Publications, 2001), p. 24.

day, welcome the guest, feed him with flying fish, embrace him, and introduce him to your family. On the second and third day you continue to entertain, but on the fourth day you give the guest a hoe to work on the land. On the fifth you remind him of his family. You hint it is time to go. If by the tenth day he does not show signs of leaving you show him the door. Political scientists deduce that this must have been the prelude to colonial rule. Believing that the guests were only passing by, they entertained them, collaborated and were eventually displaced as owners.

Another characteristic element of traditional African *Ubuntu* is the sense of family. The moral and religious value attached seen to the family are sacrosanct, evidenced among other things, by continuing bonds with ancestors, and the need to propagate human life. The perpetuation of family is held to be a duty in many African societies. For the same reasons, a small family is still not understood in Africa; life is valued over material comforts. *Ubuntu* is also shown in the raising of children including those of the extended family when need arises. A big family is seen to be just a sign of what a person's inside is: a person's heart, his generosity, his largesse with the community. Community life in African tradition was just family life writ large. In this sense, participation in the life of the community, whether in the circle of one's kinsfolk or in public life, was considered an important duty and the right of all.

This leads us to another level of *n-tu*, the level of action and interpersonal relations. For one's *n-tu* to be whole, one must first be 'humanized' because the received nature, received '*ntu*' is *inadequate, un-whole*, in need of completion. At the moral and social level the acts that complete that nature form a higher level of '*ntu*'. That is to say, whereas all human beings have '*ntu*' as received nature, they may not have it in the second dimension. Each human being at this level is different. One is human in proportion to how he or she relates to other humans; we are truly human only in community with other persons. This was the context in which Desmond Tutu, winner of the Nobel Prize for peace, made the now famous explanation of *Ubuntu* as a concept that defies expression in any one word. He said: "when we want to give high praise to someone we say, '*Yu, u nobuntu*'; "Hey, he or she has *Ubuntu*."⁴² That is to say, he has what it means to be human; he has the human qualities of magnanimity, hospitality, generosity, friendliness, caring, affection and compassion.

HERMENEUTICAL ANALYSIS OF THE *UBUNTU* WORLDVIEW COMPARED TO NON-*UBUNTU* VIEWS

By emphasizing the communal over individuals, the *Ubuntu* worldview, some scholars have sharply criticized it as falling short of

⁴² Desmond M. Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (London: Rider, 1999), pp. 34-35.

providing a holistic view of the nature of man. At the heart of that criticism has been the question of individual freedom and moral responsibility. It is argued that if personal integrity lies in one's location in a community, if personal freedom lies in the concrete capabilities, privileges, and immunities which derive from communal life, then the various capacities which we call 'personal' take a second or even become passive?⁴³ Other factors usually mentioned are gender issues, property ownership and governance, considerations of human dignity, and human rights. In all these aspects, doubt is cast over *Ubuntu* as an African identity, with arguments that the concept is simply utopian, a romanticized ideal of African societies, by scholars who are simply trying to give a more substantial status to the communitarian ethos in modern Africa. The critics look at *Ubuntu* as no more than a straw puppet, a mythologized African world view whose place in modern Africa is questioned.⁴⁴

Appropriate responses to these challenges have been given by, among others, Kwame Gyekye, Segun Gbadegesin, Chukwudum Okoko and Nono Makhudu.⁴⁵ Without necessarily delving into those debates, a task that would require a different study, it is worthwhile to consider Pratt's argument in relation to the real meaning of the *communal* character of African culture. His argument, which is adopted in this paper, is that by *Ubuntu* is not meant that the good of the individual person is subordinated to that of the group, as it would be in Socialist society. *Ubuntu* does not mean that the individual pursue the common good at the expense of his own basic good. Rather it means that in pursuing the good of the community, as one embedded in that community, he also pursues his or her own good.⁴⁶

There is then a marked distinction between *Ubuntu* communalism and Socialist theory. This distinction lies within the very conception of man and his relation to nature and to the divine. For Marx, human reality is not to be understood by references to spirit or God; neither, as Lotz observes,

⁴³ E.D. Prinsloo, "The African View of Participatory Business Management," *Journal of Business Ethics*. Vol. 25, No. 4 (Jun., 2000), pp. 275-286; http://science.jrank.org/pages/7766/Humanity_African-Thought.html.

⁴⁴ Cf. E.D. Prinsloo, "On a Communitarian Ethos, Equality and Human Right" in D. Prinsloo, *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Jun., 2000) pp. 275-286.

⁴⁵ Segun Gbadegesin, *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991); Chukwudum Okolo, "The African Person: A Cultural Definition," in P.H. Coetzee and MES van den Berg, eds., *An Introduction to African Philosophy* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 1995); K. Gyekye, "Person and Community in African Thought," in K. Wiredu and K. Gyekye, eds., *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies I* (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992).

⁴⁶ A. Pratt, *Ethics and Accountability in African Public Service*, edited by Sadig Rasheed and Dele Olowa, African Association for Public Administration and Management (Nairobi: ICIPE Science Press, 1993).

“does it relate itself to an eternal or to a substantial truth. As Marx points out in his Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, “For man, the root is man himself... for man the supreme being is man.”⁴⁷ Consequently, philosophy comes to an end as soon as man realizes himself for it no longer expresses and possesses a higher and more substantial form of truth which is separated from one’s reality. In other words, the nature of human kind in its development comes to an end through the development of culture. Through culture, which is the process of history, man returns to himself and realizes what he is. As Lotz points out:

In his attempt to invoke human reality as the main issue of philosophy and thereby to reestablish anthropological thinking within the development of 19th century, (Marx) tried to reject every idea that is based in an ontological description of human reality. Instead, in line with the Critical Theory of the nineteenth Century, he advanced the thesis that man was made by social relations and the social environment.⁴⁸

Unlike Marxism, the underpinning rationality to *Ubuntu* is theistic. No doubt, many of the qualities that *Ubuntu* emphasizes, such as warmth of character stressed through empathy with other people, understanding, communication, interaction, participation, sharing, reciprocating, harmony, and a shared world view and co-operation, already exist as an ideal in none African cultures as well. In that sense, *Ubuntu* is not a novelty because these qualities or values are not, properly speaking, exclusive to *Ubuntu*. In this respect, Nono Makhudu, a strong supporter of *Ubuntu*, recognises that Japan, for example, has its family system or ‘Ningen Kankei’ which stresses similar qualities and values.⁴⁹ That notwithstanding, there is a uniqueness, proper to *Ubuntu*, and which is conspicuously lacking in much of contemporary Western thought and behaviour. For example, Thaddeus Metz observes that the idea that interpersonal relationships of some kinds have *basic* moral status is rarely found in Anglo-American or Continental normative theory.⁵⁰ In Contemporary Western cultures, however, the emphasis is not on being one’s brother’s keeper, but on individualism of the type highlighted by Charles Taylor’s book: *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Individualism and relativism of values have become one of three main malaises of Western society. By contrast, African thought still

⁴⁷ Karl Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, (1992:251),” in Christian Lotz, “From Nature to Culture?” *Human Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2006), p. 45.

⁴⁸ Lotz, p. 45, “Diogenes and Philosophical Anthropology.”

⁴⁹ Cf. N. Makhudu, “Cultivating a Climate of Cooperation through *Ubuntu*,” in E.D. Prinsloo, p. 277.

⁵⁰ Thaddeus Metz, “Toward an African Moral Theory,” in *Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2007), p. 333.

emphasizes the social dimension of being human. This is perhaps what most significantly separates *Ubuntu* from modern Western thought. At both the personal and social levels, African thought reflects considerations and maxims that view the individual as socially embedded.

The other major separation of African thought from modern Western philosophy is given by Wiredu. He sees this as the Western, more so the so called 'Critical Philosophy,' which emphasizes the concepts of mind and body as in a polarized material-spiritual opposition. African tradition present beliefs in a quasi-physical conception of man, whereby mind and body are the reality of the person, a reality so strong that community with the family, such as the ancestors, is considered possible even in the afterlife. Thus, the spirits of the ancestors are believed to live on, and they are expected not to be indifferent to one's distress; they can intervene in one's life in a good or malicious manner.⁵¹

It is, therefore, important to not only venerate the ancestors, but to, eventually, oneself become an ancestor worthy of veneration. For this, the person agrees to respect the community's rules; they undergo initiation to establish formal ties with both the current community members and those that have passed on, and they ensure harmony by adhering to the *Ubuntu* principles in the course of life.⁵²

African thought, nonetheless, is not ultimately that unique, if one considers the entire history of philosophy, particularly *traditional* Western normative theory such as Aristotle's ethics. The main difference lies in the fact that the virtues that Aristotelian ethics emphasizes are perfections that start with the self. It is the good self that reaches out towards others, rather than the opposite. The excellent person is related to his friend in the same way as he is related to himself, since a friend is another himself.⁵³ This includes another factor, that is: in order to relate to another as to oneself, one must love oneself. To grasp the meaning of this maxim of Aristotle's, one should realize the reasoning behind *love of self* being prior to the love of neighbor. By self-love, Aristotle does not mean love in the sense of satisfying one's own passions, but in that of having the respect due for the cultivation of the noetic self – that is the divineness, the cultivation of that part of our being that transcends. That part of self is our mind and soul. Without this understanding as the basis of love, acting for the community lacks firm grounding. Hence, as Voegelin points out,

⁵¹ This fact makes it easy for African people to believe in the Christian teaching regarding the intercession of the saints.

⁵² Cf. Ubuntu philosophy as an African philosophy for peace. www.africafiles.org/article.asp?ID=20361

⁵³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 1170b6-7.

“Aristotle makes an explicit distinction between a higher lower-order and higher-order goods; such that the higher goods are the driving force for the search for the higher lower goods, such as love of things and love of neighbor.”⁵⁴ For him, “the person labors for his friends and for his native country, and will die for them if he must; he will sacrifice money, honors and contested goods in general, in achieving what is fine for himself.”⁵⁵

In a sense, the *Ubuntu* worldview falls close to this pattern of Aristotle’s ethics in that it, too, is super-material. If material goods were the only goods, then one person’s good would continually conflict with the good of others. If, however, non-material goods exist, then it is possible to reconcile the ethics that originates in the interpersonal relationships at the point of departure, an ethics of individual virtue that project outwards. To establish that link more properly, one needs to look beyond *Ubuntu*, for a further understanding of human nature and identity that would respond to the ideal of *Ubuntu* world view if were to be fully explored. This is where the second Ganda saying applies “*Wisdom is like fire, when it is extinguished in your home, you get it from the neighbor*”. My search is therefore a combination of ancient and contemporary thought, more in the spirit of *Ubuntu* rather than in its topical reality. The idea here is that “a philosophy of man is something more than just the expression of what is believed to be or not to be human by a specific culture according to its values system.”⁵⁶

To begin with, the *Ubuntu* worldview is strange when viewed from contemporary Anglo-American philosophy where, as Lots points out, until recently, Philosophical Anthropology was denied any legitimate place within the province of philosophy and relegated to the realm of ideology. Contemporary scholars of ‘Action,’ such as Theodor Adorno went as far as to claim that philosophical anthropology constitutes the attempt to escape social mediation of human reality simply because it deals with what man is, rather than on what he becomes through society.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, some African philosophers have fallen precisely into this whirlwind. Taking this cue, we find D. Masolo, for example lamenting that it is no longer clear what a human being is, that philosophers can no longer concur that reason, in its instrumental sense, is what distinguishes humans from other entities in the world.⁵⁸ He however concedes that “at least it is

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1169a18-35.

⁵⁶ E. Voegelin, *Anamnesis* (Notre Dame Ind., University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), p. 59.

⁵⁷ Christian Lotz, “From Nature to Culture? Diogenes and Philosophical Anthropology” *Human Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2006), p. 43.

⁵⁸ Cf. D. Masolo, <http://science.jrank.org/pages7766/Humanity-African-Thought.html>.

plausible to claim that the freedom of having and expressing one's opinion is still characteristically human.⁵⁹

This non concurrence amongst philosophers, regarding who is a human being, what is the human condition, is new and not, in my opinion, as widespread as Masolo and others would want us to believe. Certainly, in the *Ubuntu* worldview, this dichotomy does not exist. A human being is a human on account of many things, many of which would not happen if reason was not the distinguishing feature of being human. I dedicate the next section therefore to those things which we experience in our human nature, characteristics which specifically belong to the human condition.

Human Nature as a Given Condition or Reality

In *The Veil of Isis: A History of the Idea of Nature*, Pierre Hadot describes nature variously as: 'constitution',⁶⁰ 'origin of the heavens and all that is contained in them',⁶¹ as 'a process in the sense of appearance',⁶² as 'form' and as 'essence' all of which can be traced to Greek philosophers, particularly Aristotle. For purposes of this section, it is worthy of note that Aristotle's definition of 'essence', is that of "a principle of inner motion inside each thing, which is also a principle of growth', an internal dynamism in any given thing by which it acts in a particular way."⁶³ This essence, and the capacities pertaining to it, comes from outside, constituting a given thing as such and such a thing, it's 'nature'. This is a *first dimension* of the understanding of nature; nature as reality, a reality that encompasses everything that exists, including human beings. This is nature as given. For each reality there is a way of being according to the kind of essence received. This is the given (*datum*) in human nature. This dimension of nature as given is known even though it is not yet philosophically expressed as such in the African myths of origin.

Here too, nature is *the principle of operation for that particular type of thing or being that enables them to act* spontaneously in accordance with their nature or the manner that is proper to them. Birds fly, dogs bark, etc. In this sense the given in human beings includes all the common somatic aspects of like animals such as mammals. In the case of human, there is an additional operative power, the psyche, whose characteristics are consciousness and creativity. This aspect of human nature is nowhere explicitly mentioned in traditional African wisdom. It is assumed. This assumption is clear in certain proverbs and on the basis of the sagacity involved which can only be possible on account of the mind

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Hadot, p. 18.

⁶¹ Hadot, 19.

⁶² Hadot, 8.

⁶³ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*.

as a superior power absent in the animal world. African cultures recognize this capacity to be among the gifts, a received power. It is the 'n-tu,' the distinctive elements that underpins the *ubuntu*, allowing all humans to possess a common nature, a common trait, the human condition that must always be recognized and respected in all human beings.

Without entering into the psychosomatic reality of the human condition, many African beliefs appear to indicate a quasi-physical conception not only of the mind, but also of the afterlife'.⁶⁴ The body and spirit are known to be two distinct powers working together, but which at times can be in opposition. Among the Bantu people of Eastern Africa and others places in the region, the 'spirit', the non-physical presence, is often referred to as 'heart' or *moyo*, in Kiswahili. *Moyo* is the heart and verve that moves us, the spirit (will and affections). Different from *moyo* is *akili* (thought or reason) which is always at work. At times, though *moyo* should be allowed to come before *akili*. Consequently, the proverbs seek to provide *kihooto* (Kikuyu for cogent reason) for action; proverbs can be of different types. The sapiential ones aim to identify good character by praising virtue and ridiculing stupid or selfish behavior. Since proverbs use an indirect route to convey the message, they prepare the emotional disposition of the learners to hear and understand the teaching. By way of example, one can point to the Banyarwanda of Rwanda, the Barundi of Burundi, and the Bashi of the Congo. These people underline the ethic of the 'heart' because, the 'heart' is the human person's 'little king' which means guide. Thus, a person who incurs guilt is because he has a dirty 'heart'. For a Bahema (Central Africa) a person with "two hearts" is one who lacks generosity or who is basically niggardly.⁶⁵ *Ubuntu* culture will favor the latter in certain circumstances. This explains why time, important as it is for efficiency may not always be a priority among African people if there are reasons to defer something in order to attend to someone. The only way this kind of expression can come about is if heart and mind are understood to be distinct realities that can work together.

At another level, each person is distinct on account of their body. The body creates distinction between people so that each one has their particular way of being, their nature. The place and importance of the body in the reflection of human nature too has not received much attention in Western Philosophy. Yet, it is our constant experience. As members of the animal nature, the human being has a body and needs the body. A human being manifests himself or herself above all through or by means of a specific, physical and particular type of body. The first experience we have of being human is through the body. In the world, the body is an

⁶⁴ Cf. Wiredu Kwasi, "Humanity in African Thought," D. Masolo, [http://science.jrank.org/pages7766/Humanity Africa n-Thought.html](http://science.jrank.org/pages7766/Humanity%20Africa%20Thought.html).

⁶⁵ Bujo Benezet, *Foundations of an African Ethic* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2001), p.120.

essential feature of being human. It is because of the body that one occupies or lives within a specific habitat, occupying space and time. This experiential fact has a variety of significances: insofar as the human being is situated in space, in the world, he exists as part of that physical, material world or the *cosmos*. But, as we shall see below, on account of how his action, action understood in the sense of free activity accordance to freedom, man is part of nature in a manner different from other beings: in nature and apart from nature. The body matters too, but much less than the spirit. The hospitality given to the guests takes care of his or her wellbeing as a priority. Only the person with a 'bad heart or bad spirit' overlooks the material welfare of the neighbor, thereby lacking *Ubuntu*.

It is, nevertheless understood that, body contributes to making human nature not only distinct from that of non-humans, but also creates a difference between human beings themselves in terms of physical features, bodily shape, pigmentation or race, gender, and physical strength. Even where two people look alike, they still have the distinguishing unique features, of which the best example are finger prints, which no human has equal to that of another. One other example is the particular specialization of the body that enables human beings to undertake 'human' activities. The human being is the only animal capable of ideation and technology, that is to say, to bring to reality what has been conceived in ideation.

When we talk of speak of person (*muntu*), we usually do so in an abstract way; but since there are no abstract human persons, all persons are concrete human beings who belong, for example, to a gender. In life there are therefore two types of persons: male and female, two kind ofs persons, each of whom offers a mysterious, yet complementarily and wonderful diversity of humanness in a way that differs from that of animals. This too is recognized and expressed in the traditional understanding of human nature; not two different types of beings, but two human beings who manifest some specific biological and psychic differences. The *Gikūyu* and *Mūmbi* myths take cognizance of this reality through various tales. These differences are displayed in behavior before certain phenomena such as decision making, the care for other human beings and sensitivity in certain situations. Experience, and psychology shows that all these often follow different paths in man and in woman, thereby endlessly enriching human life. These are the main phenomenological characteristics of the human person that distinguish him or her from any other type of being.

Human Nature as Nurture: Culture and Cultures

Since he lives in the world, within specific space, place and time, man necessarily comes across other humans with whom he interacts, out of necessity, either of communication, or of existence. It is this need that leads to the *inter-subjective* character of human nature. Hence, although each human being has her or his own personal, un-transferable and un-repeatable life, the human condition demands the need for other people.

The outcome of that necessity is that as the first condition, to be fully human, the individual person must learn from others what it means to be 'human'. A Kiswahili saying puts it this way: *Kabla hujafa, huja umbika*.⁶⁶ That is to say, until death one is in the process of becoming more; one is not fully 'created', not fully what he should be. In simple, proverbial terms, what this means is that human nature as 'given' is not complete without the inputs of the receiver and of the society. People are not born with developed capacities. The development of those capacities is part of the 'humanizing' project of becoming human. The human being is a product not only of the nature common to all human beings, but also of the kind of nurture he/she has received, of his socialization and culture.

'Kuumbika', or the 'humanizing' aspect of being human, depends on the individual's willingness and capacity, on the one hand and on the society on the other hand: the family, the clan, one's peers. On account of having body and spirit, and the fact that the world presents humans with multiple possibilities, every person can and should realize one's individual life project. The 'projects' are not defined by the given nature; they must happen as a result of freedom and socialization within the kind of society one is embedded into. Man's life project can be more or less elaborate giving rise to different kinds of cultures. Human creativity is dynamic, and results in culture. Human beings have cultures. Animals do not; they have uniform universal instincts, and their bodies have not been endowed with capacities for innovative or elaborate creative activity as is the human body. Animals do not have abstractive natures.

Ubuntu humanization gives much emphasis to 'the other'. The best way by which human beings reach out to other human beings is by giving to others what is theirs. A person reaches fulfillment as a person when he takes part of his intimacy and gives it to another as something valuable, and the other person accepts it as theirs.⁶⁷ This is Aristotle's view of friendship. Giving to other persons what belongs to one is called *generosity*, and generosity is not possible without a prior virtue, the virtue of *love*. Love in this sense is understood as a radical act of the will different from a mere physical emotion. It is what in Christianity is called '*caritas*'. Without much theorization as to 'why', the *Ubuntu* culture is born of this type of love, in a manner analogous to the Christian teaching of love as '*caritas*'. Needless to say, *Ubuntu* is not lived by each and every African, but that does not stop it from being the truly accepted expression of the African spirit.

This love is manifested through willingness to understand other human beings and willingness to act in community with them, sharing our gift. This is a common approach in mutual treatment among many African communities. For the Bantu people of East and Central Africa, this is

⁶⁶ Kiswahili proverb (Kenya).

⁶⁷ S.R. Yepes, *Fundamentos de Antropologia* (Pamplona: EUNSA, 1996), p. 83.

palpable through various proverbs in reference to the 'heart'. The 'heart' is often mentioned as the most significant force for all human conduct. As a result, the practice of these virtues contributes to *Ubuntu*, those who fail to practice them are said to be 'heart-less',⁶⁸ and thereby, are 'less', as far as being human is concerned. Consequently, conflicts such as racial, ethnic discrimination, or clan disputes and xenophobia have only one explanation, and that it is smallness of being or *n-tu* owing to the 'lack of heart'. Only persons can practice *Ubuntu*. Despite Alasdair MacIntyre's recent proposal that some animals do some thinking, he does agree that it has yet to be proved that they can 'abstract', because willing does require abstraction, or that they can live the virtues such as charity or benevolence.⁶⁹ This is understandable because to go out of oneself, to give oneself to others, especially when it demands effort, is proper of humans. Only they can know that this effort contributes to one's own self-realization. In brief, what this means is that true human community, or *Ubuntu* is not possible unless it proceeds from love. It cannot be imposed or commanded.

Traditional African education was basically a process of socialization, of "humanization". An individual was taken through various rites of passage to enrich his 'humanity' so that he or she can hold proper community with other people. Man is born into a community, a family and a clan. He lives in a neighborhood community, exercises an occupation or in modern terms, a profession within a community. A *community* exists when a good is participated in by many and through which the members of the community communicate with one another. Inter-subjectivity or participation is a natural response to human wants. The need for 'humanization' of the human being stems from the spatial temporal character of human nature. Some phenomenologists refer to this community participation as *inter-subjectivity*. As first condition, to be fully human, one must learn from others, from interacting with others.

Human Nature as Freedom

We come to the last dimension of human nature and identity, the dimension which, one could say with Plato, truly belongs to the person as an individual, and this is freedom. For a deeper understanding of the status of individual freedom, we again turn to African proverbs regarding human nature and conduct, the realm of individual actions. Here, the 'given' nature of the human is, so to speak, like put into his own hands, so that after knowing what is right and what is wrong, one can make deliberate choices of action. We enter then into the realm of ethics, the deepest aspect of the topic in the consideration of whether human nature and identity is constant or changing. Freedom as referred to is that of an

⁶⁸ Bujo, p. 122.

⁶⁹ Cf. A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (London: Duckworth, 2009).

inner quality of human beings by which one acts, and by which one loves or hates what one does. It encompasses too, all human activities such as work, art, technology, and inter-subjectivity – that capacity to form relationships. It is here that the perfections of the human condition or human ‘nature as given’ and the virtues, the *Ubuntu*, are determined.

Experience shows that human beings are constantly making choices. They can do so because they have a capacity for abstract activity; they can decide to act as a group, according to how they have been socialized, or they can behave individualistically. They can work together towards a goal as a team, or they can fight to tear each other away from success. This is possible because since humans are endowed with the psyche, they have the capacity to reason and determine action, make a choice and convert those choices to reality. This capacity to act from within a given purposeful goal or end is what is here referred to as ‘human freedom’. Consequently, the actions that are *truly* free are what define the human being as an individual person. We come then to yet another level of ‘human identity’, that which indicates the deepest part of the person, that which is what he or she has acquired or become as a result of personal choices.

Here again it is possible to identify African recognition of the psyche, the mind, but often the same word, ‘heart’, discussed above is used. One of the qualities of the heart is the desire for ‘Kĩhoto’ (truth/justice). The heart seeks truth as one of the qualities of the spirit, the non material aspect of humans. The heart is linked to intelligence, memory and will. It is the heart that either wills something or does not will it; the heart thinks or produces something creatively; the heart speaks.⁷⁰ Thus, the functions of the heart (spirit, mind) are multiple, and surpass the realm of emotions or feelings, to embrace the intellectual dimension as well. “[T]he ‘heart’, occupies the primary position, not only linked to love and hatred, but to practically all virtues or their absence (*thahu* or sin in Kikuyu), because these are brought into relation to it. Self-control – temperance –, justice, courage and bravery, *truthfulness* or *honesty* and all the opposite thoughts and actions proceed from the ‘heart.’”⁷¹ The distinction between good from evil advice of the ‘heart’ is covered in certain proverbs. For example: “*Practice self-control, do not let yourself be led astray by the desires of your ‘heart.’*” Thus, regarding human conduct, the ethical ideal or excellence is a personality which displays self-control both internally and externally, where the latter dimension is dependent on the former. So another Kikuyu proverb says: “*There is no difference between a thief and one who covets,*” which means that theft is not simply the material action of taking something, it includes the unseen disposition.

Ideally, therefore, the ‘*ubuntuized*’ person is also virtuous. He or she is a prudent and temperate person who knows how to balance *Kĩhoto/akili* (the mind), which is specifically human and his or her

⁷⁰ Cf. Bujo, p.121.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

various emotions and sentiments which arise as characteristics that both humans and beasts experience. This dimension of human nature requires individual willingness and action. Hence, not everyone can be said to be human in this sense. To put it another way, not everyone has a heart.

This wisdom is not peculiar to Africa but is part of human experience in and beyond *Ubuntu*. Freedom of action means that the human person, even the 'ubuntuized' person, can invent new ways of behaving, or he can act against what he has been nurtured-socialized to do. One can, in other words, do something against what he thinks s/he ought to do, or even can do it simply because he wants to, because it satisfies his mood at that moment. Because this dimension of 'human nature as freedom' demands individual willingness, understanding and effort, not everyone reaches the ideal of *Ubuntu*, nor of human nature. Ideally, the 'ubuntuized' person is also virtuous, just, prudent and temperate. She knows how to balance *Kihooto/akili* (the mind), which is specifically human, with emotions and sentiments which are characteristics that both humans and beasts experience. When this distinction is absent, one acts unjustly and inhumanly. This is the only way one can understand such phenomenon as the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, Amin and Obote of Uganda in the 1970s and 1980s, and the post election violence in Kenya in 2007/2008. Because he is free, the human being can rebel.

Hence, among the Bantu of East Africa, the *Kihooto* proverbs identify desirable or praiseworthy traits of character such as honesty, which enable someone to be sensitive to truth and falsity, generosity which promotes goodwill; reciprocity of friendships, kindness, and self-control or moderation, which restrain personal greed and sensual appetites such as the use of food, sexual drive and property. There are proverbs to teach self-restraint. For example, "*one who does not possess a goat does not yearn for meat*", which means that if someone does not possess a goat (property) he ought not to covet that of others. The implication is that often, one lacks things due to a lack of industriousness.

One other aspect of human nature as freedom refers to the transcendental character of our human condition. Part of *Kihooto* (cogency, logic) is the realization that existence is not something we invent for ourselves, but rather it is a received fact. We already alluded to this fact in the myths of origin and ATRs. The quest for origin, which in the history of mankind led to different myths of creation, and in philosophy to the problem of the existence of God, is the best manifestation of transcendence. Transcendence can occur at three different levels: with regard to things, with regard to one's relation with other people, and at a higher level, with the divine. Transcendence in the first level is part of *Ubuntu* as a worldview. In this sense, one transcends from being embedded, heart and body in the material reality surrounding him by considering that reality as something relative. At the second level, one transcends when one shares what one is with other people. This *intersubjectivity*, and participatory character of man is possible because the

human being is transcendental by nature. He is 'other' directed, directed to interpersonal relations.

A first step towards reaching out to others is dialogue; humans have a *dialogic* nature that springs from the uniqueness of the essence of human nature in that it has both a spiritual and a psycho-physical quality. The spiritual quality enables human being to share their inner richness and creativity that arise from their thoughts and sentiments. Dialogue makes it possible to communicate what is personal to someone else because nobody can know exactly what another person thinks or desires unless that person decides to reveal it. This dialogic characteristic of being human is manifested through the bodily organs of speech elaborated in a unique way.

For African cultures dialogue is considered to be an important feature for *Ubuntu*, or 'human identity', hence the abundance of song and dance in all significant African ceremonies. Songs and dances accompany a new birth, the various rites of passage to adulthood, marriage and harvests. Similarly, rogation prayers in times of droughts, floods or other calamities are often sung out loud. Similarly, the passage to the afterlife has, for some African societies, special funerary songs and dances. Good tidings are received with ululations. Among the Kikuyu of Kenya, for instance, tidings of the birth of a boy child are communicated through six ululations by the womenfolk; that of a girl with three. Dialogue is at the very heart of *Ubuntu*, and it comports certain norms of propriety such as *palaver*.

In this, African cultures are not alone, as can be surmised from the following words from Charles Taylor who also considers dialogue and language in its different expressions as a feature of human identity. In his words:

We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining an identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression. For purposes of this discussion, I want to take "language" in a broad sense, covering not only the words we speak but also other modes of expression whereby we define ourselves, including the 'languages of art, of gesture, of love, and the like. But we are induced into the exchange with others. No one acquires the languages so needed for self-definition on their own. We are introduced to them through exchanges with others who matter to us – what George Herbert called 'significant others. ...'⁷²

The most important function of dialogue is that it is the most meaningful medium to share one's inner life with other people; to explain

⁷² Charles Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, pp. 32-33.

oneself to them. Proof of the importance of this sharing is that the lack of it gives rise to misunderstanding.

Sharing of thoughts, desires and sentiments takes us to the realm of personal intimacy, of the inner life that belongs truly to oneself and therefore most “personal”. The content of that life constitutes the personal history of each one which makes one to be who he or she is, a ‘someone’ rather than a ‘something’. This reality manifests itself and expresses itself through one’s sensitivity, feelings, emotions and self-awareness. These occur differently in different people. Thus, intimacy among persons is not the same; each human being has a distinct biographical history. One’s inner life gives rise to something *incommunicable*, individual, and unique. Empirical research on human biological development of at least the last 200 years shows, according to Rene Dubois, that,

All, having fundamentally the same structure, operate according to the same physiological processes and are moved by the same biological needs. Nevertheless, there are no two identical human beings, and, still more important consideration, the individuality of a person living today is different from that of all other persons have lived in the past or who will live in the future. Each person is unique, unprecedented, without a double.⁷³

Hence, notes Gilson, “evolution appears not to be oriented to the production of new species each consisting of millions of individuals similar to each other, but through existing species to the production of innumerable individualities, irreducibly different. ...”⁷⁴

It is thus we can say of human beings that each one responds to the question: “Who are you?” rather than “what are you?”

Because these individual humans are immersed in time and space, this intimacy of which we are speaking, is not static. It is creative and therefore subject to change, to growth or decline, thereby constituting one’s personal history. In an effort to distinguish between what he refers to as negative individualism or the dark side of individualism, that is to say, individualism is the claim to center on the self or narcissism, a trend that wrongly assumes the name of ‘authenticity’, and positive individualism, Charles Taylor says of the latter: “there is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life this way, and not in

⁷³ R. Dubois, “Biological Individuality,” *Forum* 12(1969):5, cited in *From Aristotle to Darwin and Back Again: A Journey in Final Causality, Species, and Evolution*, Etienne Gilson (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 99.

⁷⁴ E. Gilson, *From Aristotle to Darwin*, p. 99.

imitation of anyone else...” But this gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life. I miss what being human is for me.”⁷⁵ In this sense it is correct to say that human nature and identity are different for different people, but nevertheless, all humans have equal dignity as human beings, as persons.

The dignity of the person means that every individual is a value in him or herself. In this sense, the Ubuntu, ‘I am because we are’, becomes problematic if interpreted literally. The level of action, this requires that every human being should, ideally, treat the dignity in every other human being in the Kantian way: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, either your own person or the person of another, always as an end, never merely as a means.”⁷⁶ This appears to be a modernized way to express the very old maxim or the ‘Golden rule’, which exhorts all to treating other human being with respect. It can be interpreted in different ways: for some it is to treat them with fairness, for others to treat them with love. Rarely does one find in these claims any clearer explanation of love above or beyond what Aristotle already taught. Some theorists, in an effort to be more precise, pick several virtues and try to encompass in those the whole gamut of the meaning of ‘love’. Alexandre Havard,⁷⁷ for instance, has found in ‘magnanimity’, the crucial virtue of good leadership. Magnanimity combines two words, these are, *magna* and *anima*, a ‘big heart’.

Treating humanity in every person always as an end, and never as a means, implies that it would be wrong to instrumentize persons. Human dignity stems from the intrinsic and constitutive human nature on which one’s very existence depends. Hence, human dignity is not a result, or consequence of the possession of any capacity to exercise certain qualities, but of the very fact of being human, even if one were to lack those qualities, including the qualities of *Ubuntu*. Thus, a human being or a group may be of a different race or gender, or lack some specific physical or psychic capacity, or development, etc, but that does not thereby reduce in any way the human dignity of that particular individual or group of individuals. In a word, fundamentally, one is either a person or not a person in a radical way, but one cannot be more or less of a person.

Experience of Human Nature and Identity as Spiritual and Transcendent

Common human experience portrays the human condition as fraught with effort or struggle to detain time. Human beings of all cultures try to make the past present either through keepsakes, or memory of the past,

⁷⁵ Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 29.

⁷⁶ I. Kant, *Foundations for Metaphysics of Behavior*, p. 429. In Yepes, p. 84.

⁷⁷ Alexandre Havard, *Virtuous Leadership: An Agenda for Personal Excellence* (New York: Sceptre, 2007).

especially the pleasant aspects of the past that make them happy. Many appreciate the 'good old days', when everything was better. Every generation has them. Script and storytelling have their origin in this effort to perpetuate the past and point toward the future. Humans try to anticipate (bring forward) the future in order to have influence on their destiny, and to exercise some control over it.

Seers and sages, or the miscreants such as witches are people who purport to specialize in seeing the future. Among the concerns of the future is the realization that since the human being is an embodied being, inescapably the human life-span must expire some time and with it the individual existence in the world of sense. That happens when one's time space in the body runs out leaving one with the longing to live longer. But if that was all, why would it matter so much? The African answer is the belief that there is an afterlife. This explains the longing; the entry into the unknown, some immortality or eternity which is the lot of every person. The transit to that unknown is an important rite of passage in African traditions. Although there are different understandings of the meaning of that transition, and how to deal with it, many African people believe that the dead continue living somehow. For the Luo people of Kenya, Uganda and Sudan, (all non-Bantu) death is handled with great solemnity, lamentations, pomp and fuss so that the dead person see may see how valued he or she was. The greater the person the greater the fuss that might include the slaughter of as many as ten bulls. Every member of the extended family must visit the grave of the deceased, if not at the actual time of the burial itself, then at some other time, but they must come and mourn the deceased and thus placate them. For that reason, people do not bury their dead abroad, nor do they cremate them. Their bodies belong to the ancestral lands.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this paper, we see that both in the *Ubuntu* worldview and also within other systems that consider human nature, various dimensions of human nature and identity emerge. These consist in what human beings are as a result of the given nature, the use of their freedom, and what they are on account of their nurture and culture. Human nature as 'given' is not complete without the inputs of the receiver and of the society. People are not born with developed capacities, and the development of those capacities is part of the 'humanizing' project in becoming human.

Specifically, we have seen how despite the fact that African languages often do not employ distinctive and sophisticated terms to refer to certain concepts, these concepts do nevertheless exist, often expressed in the same words used equivocally. This has been shown to be the case with the concept of 'ntu,' and 'heart' which are used equivocally to refer to 'will' and 'intelligence'. We have followed the meanings of *ntu* in at least

three dimensions: firstly, as it is used to contrast the human to what is nonhuman nature; *ntu* used to describe a higher dimension of personhood where one is referred to as having *ubuntu*, a particularly important dimension in African cultures; and *ntu*, as referring to personal growth in personality and freedom. No animal could be expected to have *ubuntu*, and people who do not grow in *ubuntu* are often seen as being less than human. A person that totally lacks *Ubuntu* is therefore likened, at times, to an animal or a stone, which has no heart.

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