Human Nature and Identity in Muntu Anthropology and Ubuntu Worldview

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ABSTRACT

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"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". These words pronounced three decades ago have been part of the inspiration for this paper. Another source of that inspiration was the work of Henry Oruka, in which he presents what he called 'Sage Philosophy. Oruka defended his work with the argument that philosophical study of any topic in Africa needs to be approached under one or other of the various philosophical approaches. One such approach is the hermeneutical in which the scholar attempts to cull out the philosophical meaning from African wisdom, often hidden in myths, religions, sayings, songs, and poetry. This paper is an attempt to present human nature and identity in the *Muntu* Anthropology and *Ubuntu* worldview which shall be described in the body of the paper.

PAPER

Human Nature and Identity in 'Muntu' Anthropology and Ubuntu Worldview

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"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"[1]. These words pronounced three decades ago have been part of the inspiration for this short paper. Another source of that inspiration was the work of Henry Oruka[2], in which he presents what he called 'Sage Philosophy. Oruka defended his work with the argument that philosophical study of any topic in Africa needs to be approached under one or other of the various philosophical approaches. One such approach is the hermeneutical in which the scholar attempts to cull out the philosophical meaning from African wisdom, often hidden in myths, religions, sayings, songs, and poetry. This paper is an attempt to present human nature and identity in the *Muntu* Anthropology and *Ubuntu* worldview which shall be described in the body of the paper.

Africa is a big continent; the second largest on earth with approximately three

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[1] Pope Paul VI. Message to Africa, for the promotion of the Religious, Civil and Social Good of the Continent.

[2] Cf. Presbey, G. M. The Wisdom of African Sages. In *New Political Science,* Volume 21, November 1, 1999, pp.89-102.

thousand African ethnic groups living in it. Each of them boasts a distinctive common history, culture, language, and recognizable belief system. Is it proper then to speak of an African Worldview or wouldn't it be more realistic to speak of worldviews of different ethnic groups[3]? This topic has created heated debates among political scientists, philosophers and theologians in the last decades. Scientists have spared no efforts in an endeavor to confirm the fossil evidence of an African origin of *Homo sapiens;* linguists too have been at pains to trace African phonology to the four major world languages. One of their fascinating discoveries was that those four major world language-groups are somehow represented in Eastern Africa, and among them was what Wilhelm Breek, a German philologist, termed as 'Bantu'[4]. He coined this term to represent a phonological variant of the wider Niger-Congo group of languages to be found in Eastern and Southern Africa. It is from this term that the notion of "Ubuntu" is derived. The term refers to a sub-Bantu group of languages spoken in *Southern Africa* called the Nguni. Today there is a quasi consensus that despite there being many 'Africas', there is undeniable evidence to support the claim that some common traits of culture do exist among most African people enabling us to speak of a **Muntu philosophy** and the **Ubuntu worldview** in much the same way one can speak of Chinese or Hindi worldview.

In Bantu languages, the central term **Untu** refers to a particular kind of 'something' which is always human. It is at once the nature of the existent man or woman, and, at another level, it refers to 'humanness', understood as having qualities beyond mere ontological existence. "Untu' in this deeper sense is that which makes the person be what he or she is, and the way he relates with other people. In the Bantu vernaculars of East and Central Africa, this distinction comes out clearly in the daily language. For the Kikuyu of Kenya '*mundu'* and umundu are distinguished; similarly for the Meru, also of Kenya. The Sukuma of Tanzania make the distinction *muntu* and '*bumuntu',* so do *the* Tsonga of Tanzania and Malawi distinguishing *mntu* and 'vumuntu'. Similar

[3] Mimbi, Paul. (2007). *The Overlooked Factor*. Nairobi, Strathmore University Press, p.340.

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

distinction of untu can be found among the Haya of Bukoba near Lake Victoria, and further inland in Central Africa, the same concepts are expressed with *bomoto* in KiBobangi and '*gimuntu*' in kiKongo (Congo).[5]

Bantu cultures do not have a single word that could be a direct translation of the English term "nature". But the concept exists. For them 'Nature', was simply anything, known, or believed to be there, and containing within it hidden mysteries. They respected it with a common sense akin to Plato's, who, we learn, "refuse(d) 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"[6].

For an African notion of 'human nature and identity', the place to look is in their religious beliefs and myths of creation, their proverbs and sayings, songs and dance, as well as from traditional customs regarding the treatment of the environment. To do so one has to pick out certain myths and try to separate the incidental from the believable, having in mind that every philosophical reflection, including that of the most highly reputed philosophers, is never dogmatically final regarding the truth of anything. As Voegellin rightly points out: "Only a little inner reflection is required to surmise that man is not sufficient unto himself, but is conscious of participating in an order extending both in time and space"[7]. Myth arises from somewhere. 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, and a quest for some explanation of why nature and natural things behave the way they do…"[8]. In

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[5] Cf. McDonald, David A. Ubuntu bashing: the Marketisation of 'African Values' in South Africa. *Review of African Political Economy*, 37:124, 139-152 online version. (Accessed 8th November 2010).

[6] Hadot, Pierre. (2006) *The Veil of Isis: A History of the Idea of Nature, Cambridge MA,* Harvard University Press, p. 92.

[7] Voegelin, E., In-Between-of Human Life. p. 100.

[8] Mclean, George. *Beyond Modernity: The Recovery of Person and Community in Global Times.* Washington: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2010 p. 86.

this sense, African myths, especially those of origins are simply unsophisticated philosophy or ways to explain nature's mystery.

Data collected by anthropological and ethnological scholars[9], points to about four main common elements in the Muntu Anthropology and Ubuntu worldview. These are: dynamism, vitalism, solidarity, totality and participation, and a strong sense of the sacred and anthropocentricism. At the heart of all of them is the concept of the **'untu'** which is conceived as the essence of the human, that vital force that distinguishes man from the nature around him. Mimbi describes it as "a living force, a being that possesses life that is true, full and lofty; he dominates but respects the non-human nature around him" [10]. This force consists in the individuals participation to a less or greater degree in the 'force' of God, that mysterious higher power that, in one way or another, intervenes in our lives. God is understood as the foundation of human and cosmic solidarity, totality and participation.

The *muntu* can grow ontologically, become greater, stronger. Similarly, he can diminish, lose his vital force and even come to a complete annihilation of his very essence, a paralysis of his vital force, and hence of his vital influence. This is the fate of some of the living dead (mufu, the forceless one)[11]. A part from this interaction of forces, the muntu does not exist. The living *muntu* is in a relation of being to being with God and this relationship extends to his clan, family, ancestors and descendants. Similarly, the *muntu* is in a similar ontological relationship with his whole patrimony.

Although *Ubuntu* wisdom and philosophy distinguishes between individual existence of the self and the simultaneous existence of others persons[12], it emphasizes that one

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9 One can cite among others, Charles Nyamiti in "Ancestor Veneration in Africa". *African Traditional Religion*, http://www.africa.net/afrel/nyamiti.htm (accessed 21 April 2006)

10 Mimbi, *Overlooked Factor* p. 342.

11 Cf. Mimbi, *Overlooked Factor* p. 347

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

only becomes fully human to the extent that he or she is included in *relationships* with others.[13] That interpersonal relationship, the community bond, is created by the initiation rites, the rites of passage which uproot one from on stage in life and plunge him into the next in the hierarchy of the life of the community. At the level of action and interpersonal relations, the *Muntu* is not really a person until he acquires the higher dimension of being *muntu* or the various dimensions of being human''. Mbigi for examples argues that "I cannot separate my humanity from the humanity of those around me.[14]" This is the reasoning which led to the now famous adage: *"I am because we are".* It was in this context that Desmond Tutu, the Nobel Prize of peace, made the now famous explanation of *Ubuntu* as a concept that defies expression in any one word. "When we want to give high praise to someone we say, *'Yu, u nobuntu';* "Hey, he or she has *Ubuntu.*"[15]   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.

The *untu* or vital force in a person is manifested through the ability to act in a certain way, to decide in a certain direction faced with a greater or lesser good. It is through such actions that one enters into a relationship with other beings. That entry is symbolised through certain rituals and actions, that range from eating, spitting, touching, speaking, singing, dancing. Such words and symbols are essential for the transfer of the vital force from one person or generation to the others[16].

The Ubuntu worldview emphasizes the communal over the individual. This has led to much criticism among scholars. It is argued that if personal integrity lies in ones location in a community, or if personal freedom lies in the concrete capabilities,

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

[14]. Mbigi, L. *The Spirit of African Leadership*, Randburg: Knowres, 2005 p. 69.

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

[16]   C. Overlooked Factor p. 347.

privileges, and immunities which derive from communal life, then the various capacities which we call 'personal' fade away.[17]

One other important feature of *muntu* anthropology and *ubuntu* worldview is dialogue. In African cultures, dialogue is an important part of humanization or *ubuntization* of the muntu. Dialogue goes hand in hand with song and dance. Songs accompany the various rites of passage, adulthood, marriage, and passage to the afterlife. Good tidings are received with ululations. Dialogue is at the very heart of Ubuntu, and it comports certain norms of propriety such as palaver.

To conclude we have looked at the possibility of a *Muntu* Anthropology and Ubuntu worldview despite the fact that Africa is such a large continent with many ethnicities and cultures. We have established that studies have adduces credible evidence of that possibility. We have glimpsed at the Muntu, embedded in Nature, and his relationship to God and other men. We have identified the main features of the *Muntu* Anthropology and in the main features that characterizes human to human and human to God relationships. We did not reach to the point of pointing out certain virtues that ground the ubuntu. Suffice to mention here that those are close akin to what one finds in Aristotle's psychology and Ethics. Among others, that Human nature as 'given' is not complete without the inputs of the receiver and his actions within society. People are not born with developed capacities, and the development of those capacities is part of the 'humanizing' project in becoming human.

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[17] Prinsloo, E.D. The African View of Participatory Business Management. Journal of Business Ethics. Vol. 25, No.4. (Jun., 2000), pp. 275-286

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