Relational Being as Icon or Communal Freedom: Southern Africa's *Ubuntu*

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Abstract

Beginning from the question "What is the self?" a range of applications of the African concept of *ubuntu* is shown to be an alternate model of person-in-relation to that of Western views. In its traditional form, *ubuntu* situated the individual person in a web of relations in which self and world were united and intermingled in reciprocal relations that accentuated the obligations and mutuality of being human. Appearing in South Africa's 1993 interim *Constitution,* it lends gravity and concern for justice to all relations to which that document applies, with effects on national laws, programs, and responsibilities of governance. The genealogy, uses, and critiques of *ubuntu* are investigated, arriving at the conclusion that, as a traditional though reconstructed principle, it remains a viable force, provided its critics' analyses are accounted for, and it is treated as a force for freedom rather than an icon of the inaccessible past.

Keywords: ubuntu, relational being, community, individual, power, freedom, social cohesion, reification, mystification, reconciliation

Perceptions of Person-in-Relation

"We have different conceptions of the self the world over, not because selves differ, but because at different times and places people have more or less concern with different aspects of selfhood," writes Julian Baggini of the New School for Social Research (2016:1). He continues:

> [There is] value [in] cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary inquiry…. It is to see that our questions are not the only ones worth asking…. Take the most commonly noted, broad-brush feature of the Eastern conception of self: its relationality. Whereas in the West the self is understood primarily as an autonomous ego whose existence is distinct from that of others, in the East, it is often argued there is no meaning of self that is independent of our relations to others. The self is irreducibly social. (Baggini 2016:2)

Though the following work is about relationality and being-in-community, Baginni's points about the self apply to the concern with relationality that characterizes this era's shape and tenor. Kenneth Gergen, for example, champions a course for relational being: "If one is concerned with creating positive futures, concern should be directed to *relational pathways* … such that pathway from one [form of relation to others such as home, school, employment] leads in a positive direction" (Gergen 2009:58). He exhorts us to move on from our presumption of action as a series of causes and effects of independent beings on one another toward a *confluence* of people and things moving together, "'action' for which our supplement is required in order to bring it into being" (Gergen 2009:59).

Gergen's movement challenges what individualism and egoism – with concepts of the radical self – have held since Aristotle promoted the idea in early Western thought in the *Nichomachean Ethics.*

> [T]therefore the man who loves [that which is noblest and best] … and gratifies it is most of all a lover of self. [The man who rationally controls himself] … is most truly a lover of self, of another type than that which is a matter of reproach [*i.e.*one who loves, *e.g.,* wealth, honour, and bodily pleasures]. (Aristotle 1908: Bk IX, Ch. 8)

Each worldview has its ways of handling human needs for trust, honesty, respect, mutuality, solidarity, and expanded identity. The best a Western view of Gergen's "bounded self" (Gergen 2009:3-28) seems able to do is to recognize the self-seeking advantages of nurturing social capital, a theme of Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000) and *Better Together* (2003). Seeking to establish and maintain relationality, Putnam writes:

> A society characterized by generalized reciprocity is more efficient than a distrustful society…. Trustworthiness lubricates social life…. Civic engagement and social capital entail mutual obligation and responsibility for action…. [S]ocial networks and norms of reciprocity … facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit. (Putnam 2000:21)

Globalization, for many years a one-way process, now seriously afflicts North Atlantic[1] society by fracturing the normal, and causing a retreat into separate enclaves with increased viciousness toward each other. We seek alternative models, even if only to understand our own.

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[1] This term is anthropologist/philosopher Wim van Binsbergen's substitute for "Western culture," adopted in this article.

Ubuntu and Its Conjunction: "A person is a person through other persons"

One such alternative is a model that burst into the world's view during South Africa's transition from over 300 years of colonial-type rule into a democratic society. It is a contemporary rendering of *ubuntu,*[2] a traditional African concept that resembles, but is more endemic than Kenneth Gergen's relational self. Its emphasis on relationality resembles what Julian Baggini refers to above as "an eastern conception." Among ways of stating this concept, Archbishop Desmond Tutu calls it "an African *Weltanschauung* that says 'my humanity is caught up [and] is inextricably bound in yours'" (1999:31). In *No Future without Forgiveness,* Tutu writes:

> *Ubuntu* is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human… We say, "A person is a person through other persons." It is not, "I think, therefore I am." It rather says, "I am human because I belong. I participate, I share." A person with *ubuntu is* open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good…. (Tutu 1999:33)

In this description of African worldview and practices, Tutu relies on African and Africanist scholarship from the late colonialist and post-colonial period (1947-1980). Stated another way by John Mbiti, scholar of African religion and society, describing the relation between the individual and society (though not labeling it "*ubuntu*"):

> Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people…. The individual can only say: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am." This is a cardinal point in the African view of man. (Mbiti 1970:141)

Julius Nyerere, first president of Tanzania in 1962 and an African statesman and social thinker (Bjerk 2015:390), observed the following concerning the relation between the community and individual:

> In our traditional African society we were individuals within a community. We took care of the community and the community took care of us. We neither needed nor wished to

[2] Though the title of this article refers to whole region of southern Africa, its focus is on the particular use of *ubuntu* in the social and political context of the nation of South Africa since the early 1990s.

> exploit our fellow men… [We must reject] … the capitalist attitude of mind which colonialism brought into Africa…. One of [the practices of capitalism] is the individual ownership of land. To us in Africa, land was always recognized as belonging to the community. Each individual within our society had a right to the use of land, because otherwise he could not earn his living…. But the African's right to land was simply the right to use it: he had no other right to it, nor did it occur to him to try and claim one …. In tribal society, the individuals or the families within a tribe were rich or poor according to whether the whole tribe was rich or poor. If the tribe prospered, all the members of the tribe shared in its prosperity. (Nyerere [1962] 1995:69-70)

In *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Political Philosophy,* one of the first major books that specifically mentions the term *ubuntu*, Stanlake Samkange and Tommie Marie Samkange are careful to show that this designation involves specific qualities beyond the mere fact of being human:

> The attention one gives to another; the kindness, courtesy, consideration, and friendliness in the relationship between people; a code of behaviour, an attitude to other people and to life, is embodied in *hunhu* or *ubuntu.* [It] is … more than just humanness deriving from [being] a human being. (Samkange and Samkange 1980:39)

Elsewhere in their book, they elaborate that *ubuntu* involves the acquisition and practice of culture in all of its forms: foreign policy, sanctity of life, land ownership, social policy, public and private corporations, education, labor, and cooperation, with separate chapters devoted to each topic.

Ifeanyi Menkiti, a Nigerian American scholar says:

> A crucial distinction … exists between the African view of man and the view … in Western thought: in the African view it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory. (Menkiti 1979:157-8).

Later, Menkiti distinguishes between African "*collectivities*," in which people are organically related as a whole, in contrast with Western "*constituted* groups" that have a "non-organic bringing together of atomic individuals" into an association, not a community. African society, he says, is ontologically prior to the individuals in it, rather than the Western idea of people with individual rights that are prior to society *(*Menkiti 1979:166).

Scholar, poet, and first president of Senegal, Lèopold Senghor, urges the use of "communalist" rather than "collectivist" to distinguish the African view of community from the

European communist or socialist visions. For Senghor, people are "not a mere collection of individuals, but … con-spiring, in the basic Latin sense, united among themselves even to the very centre of their being" (Senghor 1963:16). He contends that even European socialism is individualistic, and says "The collectivist society inevitably places the emphasis on the [individual's] … original activities and needs…. [T]he debate 'to each according to his labour' and 'to each according to his needs' is significant" (Senghor 1965:93).

"All" is more important than "each" in this view, but what of the individual in African communal society? In Léopold Senghor's terms, African *communalism* more than European or North American *collectivism* saves the dignity and value of the individual. Because Africa's traditional model "is founded on dialogue and reciprocity, the group had priority over the individual without crushing him …, but allowing him to blossom as a person" (Senghor 1966:5). Augustine Shutte cites Ghanaian American philosopher Kwasi Wiredu, who writes: "A … trait of our traditional culture is its infinite capacity for the pursuit of consensus and reconciliation" (Shutte 1993:49). Ghanaian professor and prime minister Kofi Abrefa Busia augments that point from his experience with local leaders when he was prime minister: "So strong was the value of solidarity that the chief aim of the councilors was to reach unanimity, and they talked till this was achieved…. This feature [is a] cardinal principle of African democracy" (Busia 1967:28).

The common themes in all these writings is that the retention of the communal/relational foundation in African society is an important feature of traditional African worldview of person-in-relation in its transition back from European domination to democratic participation. This communality established the condition that, when individual black South Africans aspired to be strong leaders, they were supposed to do so in relational dialogue and consensus with a community. This sort of African philosophizing attracted several Europeans and European-Africans like Augustine Shutte, a University of Cape Town philosopher, who built upon it and assisted in propagating this perspective throughout North Atlantic academia. In his 1993 *Philosophy for Africa*, Shutte says,

> [P]ersons are defined not by this or that natural property or set of properties but by the relationships between them and others. So, for instance, Ifeanyi Menkiti says: "in the African view it is the community which defines the person…, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory." In European philosophy … the self is … something "inside" a person…. In African thought it is seen as "outside," subsisting in relationship to … other, the natural and social environment. (Shutte 1993:47)

In the 1993 edition of his book, Shutte wrote generally about African philosophy, but particularly about the relationality of the person in the African worldview, as epitomized in the Nguni language phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* – a person is a person through other persons. As elaborated below, on the basis of increasing public interest in *ubuntu* and its strong

connection with the African view of the person in the early 1990s, Shutte seized it as a potent vehicle to characterize and express his perspective in the 1995 edition of his book.[3]

African understandings of community/communalism, reciprocity, dialogue, and reconciliation are all regarded as elements of *ubuntu* by one or another of its expositors. It turns out, however, that *ubuntu* is an ambiguous concept, even more now that it has gone through the construal process of global culture and abstract analysis – particularly Shutte's – that conjoins the moral-ethical term with the more general and ordinary phrase, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, the Nguni version of what all sub-Saharan African languages offer as a unique African quality or worldview.[4]

Three analyses of this construal unpack its ambiguity. One is the course of *ubuntu* in the history of its use in contact with non-traditional people, in this case the transition to democratic government in South Africa. The second is cross-cultural philosopher Wim van Binsbergen's careful research about the effects of taking *ubuntu* out of its original context on its meaning and authenticity. Third is Christopher Allsobrook's critique of using *ubuntu* in the face of injustice.

History of the Concept – Christian B. N. Gade

Christian B.N. Gade, of the School of Culture and Society at University of Aarhus, Denmark, conducted research into the genealogy of the concept *ubuntu* – its origins and metamorphosis. His analysis

> indicates that many of the *present* ideas about [*ubuntu*], for instance that it is African humanism, a philosophy, an ethic, or a worldview, first emerged in written sources during the second half of the 1900s…. [It also] shows that *ubuntu* became an object of particular interest and consideration during the political periods of transition from white minority rule to black majority rule in Zimbabwe and South Africa. (Gade 2011:303; italics added)

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[3] In *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*, South African philosopher Mogobe Ramose asserts: "*Ubuntu* is the root of African philosophy. The be-ing of an African in the universe is inseparably anchored upon *ubuntu*" (1999:49). However, this is not the *ubuntu* of which social and political writers such as Tutu, Shutte, Metz, and the 1993 interim *Constitution* speak.

[4] *Ubuntu* is the Nguni (such as Xhosa and Zulu) languages' variant of a term used by Bantu-speaking tribes throughout Africa to mean being authentically, generously, and morally human. That term has recently been fused with another Nguni phrase often translated as "a person is a person through other persons," and regarded as an African view of person-in-relation-to-community. In this conjunction, the term "ubuntu" serves as the denotation of the whole worldview, according to some proponents.

Gade found at least 51 texts in which *ubuntu* was used prior to 1950, the first instance occurring in 1846, with only Europeans studying the term until Rwandan Tutsi Catholic priest, Alexis Kagame used it in his 1956 book, *La philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l'tre*. *Ubuntu* did not usually occur as the main topic of study in academic literature until 1980. Even then it only appeared seldom until 1990, before its abrupt prolific usage around 1994 (van Binsbergen 2001; Gade 2011; Gade 2012).

Referring to the activation and application of *ubuntu* in contemporary South Africa, Gade places its usage in the genre of "narratives of return" of the early African decolonization period of the 1950s and 60s. Gade sees the narratives of nationalists like Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (his *ujamaa* is often translated as "African socialism"), Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, and Léopold Senghor of Senegal as having much in common. Such narratives characteristically occur in a period of social and political struggle and transition. They also appeal to pre-colonial African values that pre-date oppression in order to restore disrupted culture and dignity (Gade 2011:304). In South Africa's case, one such concept is *ubuntu*. Beyond its mere use, he details the transformation of the concept from its indigenous rural context to a contemporary, globalized, mostly urban construction. In its original use, *ubuntu* was a personal human *quality.* Prominent qualities, among others, are human nature, human feeling, true or essential humanity, dignity, virtue, good disposition, obligation, responsibility, respect, empathy, graciousness, deference, politeness, kindness, feeling of well-being, and generosity (Gade 2011:307). Beginning in the 1950s, the term gradually came to be seen as a *worldview* or *philosophy*, especially with the Zulu activist and writer Jordan Kush Ngubane's articles in the magazine *African Drum*, and after his 1963 book *An African Explains Apartheid* describes it thus:

> Supreme virtue lay in being humane, in accepting the human being as a part of yourself…. It was inhuman to drive the hungry stranger from our door, for your neighbour's sorrow was yours. This code constituted a philosophy of life, and the great Sutu-Nguni family … called it … *ubuntu* or *botho …* – the practice of being human. (Ngubane 1963:76)

To understand its use in the post-apartheid context, this usage owes its origin to the often-mentioned 1980 publication of Samkange and Samkange's *Hunhuism or Ubuntu: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy*, the first major scholarly book focused exclusively on the concept of *ubuntu* as a "philosophy" with explicit political implications. This perspective became academically and popularly prominent with works by Augustine Shutte (1993, 1995 & 2001); Mfuniselwa John Benghu (1996); Tom Lodge, M. B. Ramose, and Desmond Tutu (all in 1999); Wim van Binsbergen (2001), F. Venter (2004); and Kwasi Wiredu (2008).

Though *ubuntu*'s definitions and contexts have changed and the many critics of its uses have valid points, it has potent force and salutary social effects, especially as demonstrated in the development of South Africa's constitution and the effects therefrom. In the ebullient years from 1989 to 1994, F.W. De Klerk released Nelson Mandela from prison (1990), Parliament repealed apartheid laws (1989-91), the South African government conducted multiparty talks formalized in the Committee for a Democratic South Africa (Codesa) (1992-93), and a representative committee wrote, and Parliament adopted, an interim constitution (1993). Political power swayed toward black South Africans with the first democratic national election on April 27, 1994. Though not all of this can be attributed to the influence of *ubuntu*-inspired thought and action the following words appeared significantly in the epilogue of the interim constitution:

> The *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* … provides a historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society characterized by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice, and a future founded on the recognitions of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence for all South Africans, irrespective of colour, race, class, belief or sex; … There is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for *ubuntu* but not for victimisation. (*Constitution of the Republic of South Africa,* Act 200, 1993)

Explicit inclusion of *ubuntu* in the constitution signaled that, as a concept, it would assume a foundational meaning similar to that expounded in the Samkanges' treatment of *ubuntu* at the dawn of Zimbabwe's post-colonial era.

Gade shows how English South African philosopher Augustine Shutte's 1993 *Philosophy for Africa* made the Nguni phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*– a person depends on persons to be a person (Shutte's translation[5]) – into the basis of an African philosophy of the person. In the time between that 1993 edition and its second edition in 1995, Shutte realized and adopted the intense scholarly and public interest[6] in *ubuntu* and, with an extensive preface in that latter edition, turned it into a virtual manifesto for *ubuntu*. This is all the more curious because he used this term only once – almost in passing – in his South African first edition in 1993 (Gade

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[5] Desmond Tutu (1999) does not use the Xhosa phrase, but rather uses the English "a person is a person because of other persons" to describe *ubuntu.* Mark Sanders (quoted in Drucilla 2014:70) provides a detailed grammatical rendering as "the being-human of a human being is realized through his or her being (human) through human beings."

[6] Gade's count of books in Google Books that mention "*ubuntu*" shows that such instances rose from around 20 per year in the 1970s, to as many as 70 during some years in the 1980s, to 358 in 1995, 6,300 in 2007, 11,500 in 2008, and 12,6000 in 2009 (Gade 2011:319).

2011:314; Shutte 1993 & 1995:157; Shutte in a 2010 correspondence with Gade [2011:321-22]). From that firm connection between *ubuntu* and the Nguni proverb, many subsequent articles and books published on *ubuntu* employed *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* as either its definition or its meaning – something not done extensively in print before that book (Gade 2011:319).

A massive output of scholarship and support gave rise to a conciliatory ethic that spawned much discussion, writing, and the generation of policy that sought to replace retribution with restoration, and individualism with communitarian ideals. This was particularly evident in the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The act that created it refers to the passage from the epilogue of the 1993 constitution, cited above, including the phrases "provides a historic bridge between the past … and future…" and "…a need for *ubuntu* but not or victimization" (*Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act*, 34 of 1995.)

Effects of Context – Wim van Binsbergen

The anthropologist Wim van Binsbergen provides a trenchant critique of the ways the African view of the person within society has changed over the past half century.[7] He vigorously distinguishes a traditional, village-based understanding of *ubuntu* from its current usage.

> *Ubuntu* [is] a deceptively vernacular term for an etic concept formulated in a globally circulating format.… [T]o describe the values, beliefs and images in operation at the village and family level as "the Southern African indigenous philosophy of *ubuntu*" amounts to a rendering (in discursive academic … terms) of ideas that are certainly *implied* in … village practices and ideas but that exist there under different, much more diffuse and situationally varying, linguistic formats. *Ubuntu* in the sense of the conceptual complex which modern exponents of *ubuntu* philosophy claim to exist around that term, is at best a transformative rendering in a globally mediated, analytical language, of vernacular practices and concepts which are *very far from … ubuntu philosophy*. (van Binsbergen 2001:69; quotation marks in original texts; italics added)

This is one of several graphic descriptions of the difference between *ubuntu* as practiced in its original context and that practiced by "the self-proclaimed experts on *ubuntu* [who] form a globally informed southern African intellectual elite" (van Binsbergen: 2001:70). He points to

[7] Though a European academic, he was invited to become diviner-priest in a local region because of the trust he developed with community leaders (van Binsbergen 2001:63).

the radical difference between villages where *ubuntu* is emically practiced and that which academicians coin as "the cornerstone of Southern African self-reflexive philosophy" (van Binsbergen 2001: 70).[8]

Having clarified the importance of classical *ubuntu's* original setting compared to its construction as a philosophy in an urbanized global context, van Binsbergen turns to actual indigenous uses of the term. First, the *ubu-* prefix is not a word but simply refers to a state of being, so affixing it to *-ntu*[9] means something like "the be-ing that attaches to being human." In its first usage in family or communal (including ritualistic) gatherings, it can simply distinguish humans from other features of the world, but with an implied essential continuity, as in speaking about animals or plants with *-ntu* characteristics. In this context, it also is used to distinguish people from the visible world (plants, animals, things) and the invisible world (transcendent, supernatural forces, spirits, gods, God). *-ntu* has continuity with other categories, plants and animals on one side, spirits on the other.[10]

In its second usage type, when referring to human behavior in relation to norms, it is used to refer to qualities that are appropriate for humans and those that are not. When conforming, one is acting human, when not conforming, then not human. The community can coax, reprimand, restore, reconcile. In this usage, it can go as far as to be lacking *ubuntu* so radically that the person is no longer acting as a human, and a priest may give treatment or even put one to death if the condition persists (van Binsbergen:54).

In a third sense, when there are strangers present, the root word *–ntu* can be used with prefixes such as *mu-* (person, singular) or *ba-* (plural) that indicate this human is a person in an autochthonous sense. Those who are beyond hope of being regarded as such, such as

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[8] Van Binsbergen notes that Valentin Mudimbe calls this "the liberation of difference" to refer to those who do not directly participate in the practices they describe, but who possess the academic and communication assets to formulate and codify them. *Retrodiction* is Mudimbe's coinage for generating terms and language in this service, leading van Binsbergen to observe that if *ubuntu* is Africa's gift to the world, it does not come from its practitioners.

[9] There are variants in the many so-called Bantu family of languages. *Ubuntu* is the term in the Nguni group of languages, including Xhosa and Zulu. In Sotho, another large South African language group, it is b*otho*; in Rwanda, *abantu;* in Kongo, *bantu;* in Shona, *vanhu;* in Luba, *bantu;* in Tio, *baaru;* and in Venda, *vhuthu.* The root –ntu, is augmented with prefixes to alter the meaning: *bantu* - humans; *shintu-* human; *muntu-* a human; *wuntu*, humanness, as the quality of being human, or humanity, as in the quality of being human, not the collective noun; *kantu* – Mr. Human; *buntu* – the country of humankind. (Van Binsbergen, 2001:54. For concurrent linguistic analysis of this term, see also Ramose 1999:49, 50.)

[10] Van Binsbergen gives the example of ritual purification a human undergoes after killing an animal, to both distinguish himself as human after a killing and to propitiate the spirit of the animal. Since people are seen to falter, negative occurrences or conditions are often associated causally with humans, especially those with variants of *–ntu* other than *ubuntu* (2001:54).

colonialists or enemies, might not be regarded as human or dignified by any form of word with the –*ntu* suffix. The concept *ubuntu* is not common in traditional usage (van Binsbergen 2001:55).

van Binsbergen stresses the historical irony that *ubuntu*'s use in the past fifty or so years parallels the gradual departure from traditional life and the need for a term to epitomize a venerable idea, especially for those outside the actual practice. This is particularly so in the recent era of globalization, where the dominance of North Atlantic society is erasing traditions. So he calls this "the trap of accepting the codifiers' reifications of *Ubuntu,*" referring to the scores of people in search of the essence of African religion, philosophy, and brand of humanness and an ironic increase in its use. He refers to this as an *etic* construction of a term that has no strong *emic* origin (van Binsbergen 2001:57).[11]

This attention to the construal of *ubuntu* into massive reification gives rise to van Binsbergen's comparison of his own perspective with Mogobe Ramose's extensive work a few years after Shutte's to develop the concept of *ubuntu* with his *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*. Ramose, an African philosopher, well-trained in world philosophy and in full command of the language and traditional knowledge, took what were the elements of an African worldview, polished a little-used but certainly authentic word, and then distilled those African religious and philosophical sensibilities into a consistent philosophy that he intends to be applied as "the lasting value orientation in terms of *ubuntu* [as an] alternative [that] advocates a renewed concern for the human person" from an African perspective (2001:58). While van Binsbergen agrees that Africa has much to teach the world, he sees this concept as itself a product of globalization. Van Binsbergen sees Ramose's *ubuntu* as "a contemporary academic construct, called for by the same forces of oppression, economic exploitation, and cultural alienation that shaped Southern African society over the past two centuries" (2001:62). He refers to an exhaustive list of ways that "the established socially approved and public norms, especially in urban areas, revolve around the emphatic consumption of globally circulating" features. In view of this almost total immersion in a global world and the overwhelming effects of urbanization, "there are hardly any ways left to render the contemporary urban and national situation meaningful in terms of an ancestral local cosmology" (2001:62). Where local rituals and community life are actually still practiced, they are deeply embedded in the plants and animals used, the family life, the habitations, the religion, geographic location and remoteness, technology, deep cultural awareness, and clear roles for all of the participants. The ritual and

[11] He refers to Kenneth Pike's distinction drawn from his linguistic use of *phonemic* and *phonetic*, the former referring to the smallest unit with meaning in spoken language and the latter referring to ways even an outsider could recognize and perform that sound. This distinction was applied in anthropology, in which *emic* refers to insider usage and *etic* to outsider application or replication that does not involve creation. It sometimes also has been used to refer to the subjective-objective distinction.

language are rife with proverbs, archaic and honorific expressions, and taboos that "lend to the local expressions of this knowledge a tacit meaningfulness, a powerful self-evidence, which is practically impossible to reproduce or even to obliquely indicate … outside this original setting" (van Binsbergen 2001:67-69).

The self-proclaimed experts on *ubuntu,* as van Binsbergen calls them, form a locally-informed, southern African intellectual elite who are remote in place and social practice from the emic expressions at the village level which they seek to capture. They, contends van Binsbergen, have coined the concept of *ubuntu* (2000:70). Despite his negativity toward the use of *ubuntu* by "proclaimed experts," van Binsbergen respects the effort toward its "exhortative" intent and comes up with three positive features.

First, just as there is a resurgence of the practice of juvenile initiation rites in South Africa, in spite of being "out of line with current urban life," he sees an analogy for the teaching of this form of *ubuntu*. He perceives it as "a celebration and sacralization of productive and reproductive capacities…. [E]specially among the middle classes… it is an identity with powerful, ancient symbols …" as people see their traditional culture disappearing (van Binsbergen 2001:74).

Second, these locally-based symbols and practices are forms of symbolic empowerment for people who fought to attain majority rule and cast off the yoke of North Atlantic cultural as well as political, military, and economic dominance (van Binsbergen 2001).

Third, he sees that *ubuntu* is helpful in "seemingly unsolvable conflicts and insurmountable contradictions." Its application can be effective, not because it is authentic, but merely because it gives an appearance of authenticity. Of this dynamic, van Binsbergen writes:

> *Ubuntu* can work precisely because it is novel, out of place where it is most appealed to. It allows the conflict regulator to introduce an unexpected perspective to which (for historical, identity and strategic reasons) few parties could afford to say "no." (van Binsbergen 2001:74)

But beyond the positive points, he fears that, because it is not an endemic phenomenon, it may be the cause of greater social problems than it solves "in situations where conflict is real and should not be obscured by … a blanket of mutually recognized humanity of the parties involved" (van Binsbergen 2001:75).

The first of these fears is realized in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, its most public application. He characterizes it as "the perpetrators' re-acceptance into the new South African society at no greater cost than admission of guilt and offering of apologies" (van Binsbergen 2001:76). By contrast, in places where *ubuntu* is used in its traditional manner, people hold "historic viewpoints on evil [that regard] not only the possibility but also the limitations of expiation" (van Binsbergen 2001:76). Thus, he feels that the TRC applied *ubuntu*

in ways traditional society would not have done. He thinks it was no accident that the TRC had no participation of traditional practitioners of African communal life. In fact, this model of forgiveness ignores a significant feature and interpretation of *–ntu* in the hands of traditional diviner-priests. For them, when one has no expression of *–ntu* and is unresponsive to healing, he or she is punished or put to death.

Second, van Binsbergen sees that though the ethnic discrimination has been reduced and there is a "massive reshuffling of social, economic and political power," the unremitting class inequality regarding rural-urban, landed-landless, rich-poor-middle-class, and educated-uneducated continues unabated. The black South Africans who benefitted, partly from *ubuntu* policies, are not always sensitive to those who are left behind in the wake of Black empowerment and employment programs. "In the coming conflict over scarce resources, appeals to *ubuntu* – regarding respect, satisfaction, and freedom – could mask reality and persuade more powerless Blacks to yield to the more powerful ones" (van Binsbergen 2001*:*77). He writes:

> [I]t may be misleading to suggest that a Roman-Anglican Christian model of confession and absolution [a reference to the TRC's methods and outcomes] epitomizes the ancient Southern African worldview as subsumed under the [contemporarily constructed] concept of *ubuntu*. (van Binsbergen 2001:74)

Ubuntu, originally the product of a traditional world prior to contact with the North Atlantic, is now called to re-constitute a fragmented humanity. It has been formed in the past, now framed as a solution to restore humanity, solidarity, and human integrity in a world of fractured ethics in which the solution itself is a mixture of cultural fragments.

The problem with this is that *ubuntu*, as a concept meant for restoration of identity and re-empowerment, risks being "deployed against the very people whose ancestral culture it seeks to celebrate" (van Binsbergen 2001:77)*.*

Ubuntu as Class-Based Delusion – Christopher Allsobrook

Another critical voice to add to the analysis of the uses of *ubuntu* is that of political philosopher Christopher Allsobrook, at the time of his writing a research fellow in politics at the University of Johannesburg, now at University of Fort Hare. He begins his paper, "Blackout: Freedom, without Power," in *Theoria* as follows:

> Let us assume a basic distinction in social and political theory, between a dominant formal, abstract conception of freedom – [in which] freedom is distinct from and

> opposed to power – and a more substantive, materialist understanding…. of freedom as fundamentally linked to power. (Allsobrook 2012:60)

He asserts that, if one desires freedom but has no power to secure it, he or she is still vulnerable to, and without liberation from, those who hold power. A freedom-without-power position is not effective social agency, but rather a mystification of the historical, social, political, and economic contexts of human capacities and achievements (Allsobrook:61).[12]

Allsobrook opposes what he calls "pre-political ethical frameworks" in contrast with "a historically and contextually sensitive, self-critical approach" (2012*:*62). He attaches the pre-political ethical framework label to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Chair of the TRC, and those like him who work from the *ubuntu*-generated ethical principle of harmony as a basis to "legislate on political and socioeconomic practices" (Allsobrook 2012*:*71).

Allsobrook feels that dispossessed and powerless South Africans are harmed by a pre-political ethic that offers an unrestricted society and economy to well-educated and politically active black Africans who are joining white South Africans in positions of influence, power and wealth. The poorly educated and politically inactive are left out. While he admires the grace and goodness of what he describes as Archbishop Tutu's "generous, dignified, Christian interpretation of *ubuntu*," he points to its problems and concludes by labeling it "transcendent Tutu-buntu" (Allsobrook 2012:73).

To represent his own position, Allsobrook does not have to look far in the pantheon of South African struggle to locate the prolific thinker and writer, progressive Christian, and staunch resister of apartheid, Steve Biko. He calls Biko's approach a "radically insolent existentialist account of African identity" (shorthand: "immanent Biko-buntu") "that is expressly historically contingent, and overtly political with respect to its origins and aims" (Allsobrook 2012:73). He draws the following table of illustrative polarities between the Tutu and Biko versions of *ubuntu*:

[12] A political perspective is inadequate if it sees only freedom without the appropriate education, economic access, and social and cultural capital to participate fully in society. To pretend that making people free on paper gives them equal opportunity and ability merely "lends itself to politically expedient projections of freedom and domination" (Allsobrook 2012:69).

Transcendent Tutu-buntu	**Immanent Biko-buntu**
Humanity is a collective good	Blacks' humanity dominated by whites
My humanity is bound up in yours	Blacks must fight to regain self-respect
An act is just if it prizes harmony	Harmony in present conditions is unjust
Traditional African values are intrinsically valuable	Blacks must fashion their own authentic values

About this table, he writes, "In the latter category, human freedom is historically and politically embedded" (Allsobrook 2012:74).

Claiming *ubuntu* as his own, Steve Biko writes:

> We believe that in the long run the special contribution to the world by Africa will be in this field of human relationship. The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa – giving the world a more human face." (Biko [1978] 2004:51)

Allsobrook wants to wrest *ubuntu* – "Africa's human face" – from the exclusive control of the "transcendent Tutu-buntu" advocates. He reaches back to claim indigenous African values for the more radical Biko-buntu, writing,

> Let us therefore move from the indigenous values of African Communitarianism [that Biko also claims as his rightful heritage] on a Madagascan path of evolutionary development, to the divisive corridors of power behind the liberal-democratic hedge of rational autonomy. *Amongst thirsty, pricklier shrubs of ubuntu* – following a subversive trail of resistance to slavery and colonialism – we may discover a *hybrid strain, mutated through centuries of struggle,* … born of disenchantment with abstract means of exchange and mystical rites of property maintained by the 'pure normative standpoint' … [of powerful oppressors, including governments of South Africa]. (Allsobrook 2012:72; italics and brackets added)

With this, Allsobrook assumes that *ubuntu*, as a principle, is not static and will evolve and adapt to the conditions in which it is applied. So, Biko does not consider it inconsistent for a

human-faced *ubuntu* to say that Tutu's "harmony, in present conditions, is unjust." Allsobrook asks what would happen if the ethical norms of *ubuntu* are "consciously mediated with political contexts that shape their significance" (Allsobrook 2012:74). Suggesting that prominent black apologists of *ubuntu* do not give the full story, Allsobrook asks, "What would a township tour of *ubuntu* hush up?" "What does the Bantu really think?" In answer to that, he chooses Biko's 1972 interview with an American political scientist to answer this implied question of the above chart, "Can a strictly harmonious *ubuntu be unjust?"*

> There is in South Africa an overriding idea to move towards "comfortable politics" … People are shaped by the system even in their consideration of approaches against the system…. If you look at the system managed and run by the Nationalists, it's preferable to the system as managed and run by the [Liberal] Progressive Party…. If you were working under a Progressive system, then you would get stratification creeping in, with your masses remaining where they are or getting poorer, and your cream of leadership, which is invariably derived from the so-called educated people, beginning to enter the bourgeoisie ranks. (Allsobrook 2012:72; from p. 41 of the interview)

Allsobrook notes that Biko foreshadows the exact situation that powerless South Africans face today. The Nationalist Party's iron-clad apartheid laws and system are gone, but he contends that progressives with ubuntu-inspired empowerment programs would pick from the cream of the education system's crop, creating what he calls a meritocracy by which one can acquire status by an abstract merit, such as a college degree.

Biko's way of looking at *ubuntu* says "none of us is free, unless all of us are free," instead of the pre-political version that says, "I am a person because I am part of the community" or "a person depends on other persons to be a person." "For Biko the tragedy of apartheid is that victims of this system not only acquiesce, but also participate in their own oppression" (Allsobrook 2012:73).

Biko offers a striking dose of *ubuntu* in this oppression-evolved pricklier application:

> When colonization sets in, it devours the indigenous culture [and] leaves behind a bastard culture that may thrive at the pace allowed it by the dominant culture…. Ours is a true man-centered society *whose sacred tradition is that of sharing*. We must *reject*, as we have been doing, the individualistic cold approach to life that is the cornerstone of the Anglo-Boer culture. We must seek to restore to the black man the great importance we used to give to human relations, the high regard for people and their property and for life in general; to reduce the triumph of technology over man and the materialistic element that is slowly creeping into our society. (Biko [1978] 2004:106; italics added)

In its unequivocal rejection of the opposing culture, Biko's clear contemporizing version of the traditional view of the person shows resistant agency in retaining traditional African culture over the "cold individualism" that he assigns to "Anglo-Boer culture." It applies person-centered relational humanity against the materialist tendency for the "triumph of technology" over the human, based upon "importance we *used to give* human relations." This is the Biko-buntu immanence of structural change, the "social principle of sharing" that the quotation cites, instead of the transcendent principle of harmony.

Allsobrook also invokes Nelson Mandela to refuse a pre-political ethic. He quotes Mandela in a statement that begins sounding like a Tutu-buntu approach, but ends with a twist.

> I knew … that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred… My mission was to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both. Some say this has now been achieved. But … the truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free; the right not to be oppressed. (Allsobrook 2012:74)

Mandela's "right not to be oppressed" is a deliberate step toward establishing the social structures (education, land ownership, work skills, equal opportunity for employment)[13] that will supersede the freedom offered to many whites and to black South Africans who already possess similar benefits. An uncritical approach assumes that, since people are free by the constitution and law, social and economic benefits will trickle down, and if not, then a moral appeal to equality, respect, and justice will suffice. For example, he points to the attainment of higher education credentials as a proxy for merit. He remarks that "one's education has become an index of inherited privilege" (Allsobrook 2021:75). In sum, Allsobrook assails the currently dominant purveyance of pre-political ethical approaches to societal structure. As he thinks Mandela did, Allsobrook holds that people need structural power to overcome "a reified conception of Freedom, which disguises entrenched privileges by displacing them on the other side of a mystified cosmopolitan rainbow nation" (Allsobrook 2021:75).

Christopher Allsobrook provides prescient contemporizing of the "prickly shrubs" of Steve Biko's intelligently courageous critique of apartheid that liberates *ubuntu* from a-

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[13] Structural change was part of the first major initiative of Nelson Mandela's presidency, as indicated in *Reconstruction and Development Programme: A Policy Framework* (1994). From "Introduction:" "The RDP is an integrated, coherent socio-economic policy framework. It seeks to mobilise all our people and our country's resources toward the final eradication of apartheid and the building of a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist future." The document goes on to address basic needs (water, housing, land, environment, health, social security, electricity, etc.), human resources, building the economy, and democratizing the state and society.

structural capitulation to oppression. If *ubuntu* is thus, it is a concept worthy of redemption. Though de-constructed and re-constructed by Gade, van Binsbergen, and Allsobrook's analyses, even these critics would perhaps still see *ubuntu*'s potential.

Against the Grain – Two Examples of *Ubuntu's* Value

Yes, *ubuntu* is applied in the context of South Africa, a messy, contemporary, emergent state that exists in a globalized capitalist world. Yet in spite of these valid academic, historical, cultural, and social revelations and critiques, *ubuntu* employs a venerable and communally developed view of the person. In its evolution to its present status, unique and recognizable elements of its origins remain. With all its documented imperfections, it has entered the South African public sphere. Though the analysis here has detailed the dangers of inauthenticity and mystification, below are two examples of its potential effectiveness as a social principle. One is an event, the other a seminal South African constitutional legal case. First, the event.

President Thabo Mbeki delivered the Nelson Mandela Memorial Lecture on 29 July 2006. In front of Mandela and a full representation of South Africa's political, cultural, social, religious, ethnic, economic, regional, and occupational spectrum, he made an articulate argument for the application of *ubuntu* principles:

> [T]he great masses every day pray that the new South Africa … will be a good, moral, humane and caring South Africa … that will guarantee the happiness of all its citizens…. [B]ecause of [our] infancy … we have the possibility to … infuse the values of *Ubuntu* into our very being as a people. (Mbeki 2006:1)

Mbeki proceeds to link *ubuntu* to biblical principles and quotes heavily from the Scripture, passages that he finds convey *ubuntu*. He asserts that notions like "market fundamentalism" and the belief in the "unhampered pursuit of self-interest" will destroy society as it "atomizes into an agglomeration of individuals who pursue mutually antagonistic goals." Mbeki says such pursuits will destroy "the mutually independent human relationships without which the individual human being cannot exist" (Mbeki 2006:5).

On this significant public occasion, Mbeki's assertion about the unmet goals of both economy and social equality in South Africa and other African states that he mentions, is that the "blight of intolerance, wars, conflicts, racism, tribalism, and marginalization" cry out for the balm of social cohesion, human solidarity, and national reconciliation. The "noble precept" that *we are all persons because of the personhood of all others*, he contends, is the principle by which humanity will survive and nourish its collective "soul" (Mbeki 2006:9). This is the language of the African view of the person, reconstructed by many, characterized as *ubuntu* by Mbeki himself at the outset of his speech. Can a continent, with this view of the person and

society, marshal strength from its heritage? At least on that evening, Thabo Mbeki and Nelson Mandela thought so.

The second example of invoking *ubuntu* in the public sphere emerges from a decision from the South African Constitutional Court's first major challenge.

Azanian Peoples Organization (AZAPO) and four other claimants charged President Nelson Mandela and four other respondents for their parts in the government's *National Unity and Reconciliation Act,* 1996 that established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).[14] They challenged its allowance for amnesty and reconciliation by establishing the TRC. [15] In addition, the complainants attacked the *Act* for providing the Committee on Amnesty because it was empowered to "grant amnesty to a *perpetrator of an unlawful act associated with a political objective* committed prior to 6 December 1993" (Constitutional Court: para. 7). This act provided that perpetrators of politically motivated crimes during the apartheid era who fully confessed their crimes before the TRC according to its rules, would not be criminally or civilly liable, nor could the former government or any of its bodies or persons be held liable. The complainants in this case claimed that this act violated the *Constitution's* Article 22 that provides that victims may "have justiciable disputes settled by a court of law … or other independent or impartial forum" (Constitutional Court: para. 7).

The court ruled that the *Act* and its amnesty provision did not violate the Constitution. Its ruling relied heavily on *ubuntu* as a foundational principle of South African society. Drucilla Cornell writes that *ubuntu*'s role in the South African Constitution and TRC's amnesty show that *ubuntu*, as an ethical foundation, can lead to radically different legal ends than those based on a Western or North Atlantic foundation. In short, the court ruled the *ubuntu*-based values are "justiciable." Accordingly, the courts are not the only third party to enforce the law (Cornell 2014:14).[16] Other "third parties" include a body like the TRC, even if they do not mete out punishments. The principles of this version of *ubuntu* were deemed so essential for the ordering of the emerging South African society that both the 1993 interim *Constitution* and the

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[15] Commonly known as the *AZAPO* case, there were three other applicants, including Steve Biko's widow, Nontsikelelo Biko, vs. The President of the Republic of South Africa, the Government of the Republic of South Africa, two government ministers and the Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Respondents.

[16] Cornell cites Boaventura de Sousa Santos (de Santos 2002:234 in Cornell 2014:17) to say that if there is to be a subaltern legality, Western thought must "recognize that there are other intellectual heritages and epistemologies that must inform our emancipatory practices, including law-making construed as the ethical and normative domains of being human together."

Constitution of 1996 have limitation clauses that say they can be overridden in circumstances, like the one cited here, upholding *ubuntu* (Cornell 2014:54).

In the judgment rendered in *AZAPO,* its author, Justice Ismail Mahomed, quotes the sections from the 1993 interim constitution discussed in the "History of the Concept" section above, relevant sections of which are, again, as follows:

> The Constitution ... provides a historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society … and a future founded on the recognitions of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence…. There is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for *ubuntu* but not for victimization. (*Constitution of the Republic of South Africa,* Act 200, 1993.)

On the basis of that intentional use of *ubuntu* in the constitution, Mahomed writes:

> Most of the acts of brutality and torture … occurred during an era in which neither the laws which permitted the incarceration of persons or the investigation of crimes were easily open to public investigation, verification, and correction. …. [See footnote for additional text.] The [*National Unity and Reconciliation*] Act seeks to redress this massive problem by encouraging these survivors and the dependents … to unburden their grief publicly, to receive the collective recognitions of a new nation that they were wronged, and to help discover what did in truth happen to their loved ones, where and under what circumstances it did happen, and who was responsible. (*AZAPO:* (4)*,* para*.*17*;* see footnote for additional text.)[17]

Mahomed acknowledges that, in a Western legal sense, retribution is rightfully due the claimants. However, as Cornell writes: "*Ubuntu* is a different kind of rightfulness, one … that cannot be vindicated through vengeance or retribution" (2014:71). Instead, *ubuntu*, as wrought in the context of the TRC, requires that those who benefitted from the old system must somehow regain their humanity through repairing their ethical bearing – their spirits and minds – so they can live peacefully and righteously in the tortured memory of recounting the vivid details of their deeds to bewildered, angry, sorrowful, and often bereft relatives of the child,

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[17] [See text for words preceding this quotation.] "Much of what transpired … is shrouded in secrecy and not easily capable of objective demonstration and proof. Loved ones … disappeared, and most of them no longer survive…. Others have had their freedom invaded, their dignity assaulted or their reputations tarnished by grossly unfair imputations hurled in … conflict…. Secrecy and authoritarianism have concealed the truth in little crevices of obscurity in our history. [See text for words following this quotation.] (*AZAPO: (4), para. 17*)

husband, or wife they tortured and killed. For their part, the bereaved must confront the ugly evil, re-live the horror for them and their lost ones, and watch the defiant or shriveled humanity of the murderer. Only then can they reconstruct a sense of dignity, tenderness, and love in deep mourning, which is a form of reparation.

This remarkable case is impossible to comprehend without the worldview that the constitution identified as its justifying basis, *ubuntu*.

Though there are dangers of reification and mystification in an uncritical and a-historical rendering of that concept, these cases show its virtue. What remains is an ideal that prizes social connectedness, but is not merely social, an ideal that values obligation, but is not merely obligatory, an ideal that prizes giving of self, but is neither altruistic nor sacrificial. Such an ethic has social value when applied as a foundation of law and standard of governance. What has come to be called *ubuntu* is about shaping and living out humanity through others, to which others reciprocate. As with any other complex principle, it is imperfect. Fractured, evolved, and reframed, the concept of *ubuntu* can yet serve in the sense of the words of John Mbiti, describing the essence of what has come to be referred to by the reconstituted term "*ubuntu*:"

> Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his or her own being, own duties, own privileges and responsibilities towards him- or herself and towards other people…. The individual can only say: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am." (Paraphrase of Mbiti 1970:141)

From these applications of the contemporary reconstructed concept of *ubuntu*, it is clear that sociocultural constructions such as ideas systems, laws, and institutions are deeply dependent on the view of the person that a people and language group hold. Indeed, *ubuntu* is in many ways what Giddens, Bourdieu, and others have termed a "social practice," the taken-for-granted beliefs and routinized actions which simultaneously and dialectically create both the consciousness of actors and the structural conditions that make those practices possible (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2014).

Conclusion

Beginning from the question "What is the self?" this study shows applications of *ubuntu,* which situates the individual person as elementally and inextricably related to the humanity of others. In its course, this concept is variously seen as a quality, a philosophy or ethic, a worldview, or a cultural attitude grounding a relational being-human. A more ancient and culturally embedded grounding than North Atlantic views of self, *ubuntu*, as currently discussed and used in the South African political and academic world, is radically reconstructed and globalized, as Wim van Binsbergen's work shows. Christian Gade's treatment reveals *ubuntu* as

an opportune construal, with specific adaptations to the Zimbabwean and South African political transitions. Christopher Allsobrook uncovers, analyzes, and illuminates the appropriation of the concept *ubuntu* as a tool for the benefit of a new, educated, and technologically sophisticated middle class. Its application, in the final section, to legal-national aspects of society, particularly its function and pervasive presence in the interim *Constitution* of South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, and Mandela and Mbeki's public references, is a testimony to its adaptability despite its tenuous continuity with its distant heritage.

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