"UBUNTU": THE ITINERARY, IMPORT AND UTILITY OF THE IDEA

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ABSTRACT: *Ubuntu has become a buzz word in Southern African. These days, there is talk of 'Ubuntu magazine', 'Ubuntu software,' 'ubuntu style of management', 'ubuntu ethics', 'Ubuntu foods', 'ubuntu psychology'(Washington 2010) and so on. The concept has gained a lot of currency with the completion of the de-colonization of South Africa in 1994. The question is; what is the meaning and import of the term?This paper is a philosophical examination of the concept historically and critically, with the view of determining its expediency in matters to do with nation-building, democracy and good governance all of which pervade contemporary African thought. Given the processes of globalization, can the concept make any impact? Is there utility of the concept in the development of the sub-region?*

INTRODUCTION

With the independence of the Republic of South Africa, the sub-region was awash with *ubuntu*. The sources of the concept are books and journals many subject areas – biology, anthropology, health care studies,business studies, theology, community development, linguistics, engineering, literature and even political sciences(Hailey 2008). So many perspectives have been brought into the fray. Some of the perspectives are showing signs of tension and strife. For instance, there was tension between those faithful to African traditions and those converting to Christianity and between traditionalists and those westernised and perhaps between those who retained traditional and those who converted either to Islam or Christianity in their expression of *ubuntu* (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2010). Thus, it is not surprising that the history of *ubuntu* is riddled with controversy just as the history of the Bantu people is surfeit with conflicts and crises.

A graphic representation of *ubuntu* and the despicable tensions can analogize the life of Nelson Mandela(Oppenheim 2012). For some, he was a terrorist(Hues 2011) and saboteur (African Research Bulletin 2014), a friend of dictators(Bolt 2013) and communists(Willcock n.d.). However, for others he was a saint (Netshitenzhe 2013), a liberator (Curry 2013), a strategist leader (Chorn 2010), an intellectual and democrat (Cornel n.d.), a father of the nation (Business School Netherlands 2013), and a hero (Anti-Defamation League 2013). Amidst all this lies the irony that some of the forces initially opposed to Mandela, have turned around to praise him, particularly at the time of his death. In a similar vein, the meaning of *ubuntu* is now topical in ways that were least expected before 1950! This is quite a pleasant surprise but healthy for these contestations, help in the development of African philosophy and thought. As Mkwanazi and Ramose (2005):

> While the contribution of Africans to African philosophy is crucial and irreplaceable, it is important that African philosophy should draw philosophers from outside of Africa as well. This is a sign of its maturity (Mkhwanazi 2005).

While admitting that the dichotomy of *ubuntu* perspectives need not be divided into Africans and non - Africans, it is noteworthy that there may be opposing perspectives between Africans of African descend and peoples of non-African descent. The opposing streams of thought may also be characterized as one between Africanist scholars and their non-Africanist counterparts and also between Africological scholars and their contrary partners. All this is healthy for the envisaged development and safeguard of African scholarship against what Stephen Hove labelled the celebration of Africa's rosy past. Chitumba cautioned against taking ubuntu as static but rather 'dynamic and continually adapting'(Chitumba 2013).

This paper is, in the main historical and philosophical, as it examines the evolution of ubuntu/hunhu as a concept(Tambalas 2005) and as a philosophy(Nabudere 2005) or as a worldview(Letseka 2014). This is keyto an understanding of ideas and their development in time. As William Turner puts it:

> The History of Philosophy is the exposition of philosophical opinions and of systems and schools of philosophy. It includes the study of the lives of philosophers, the inquiry into the mutual connection of schools and systems of thought, and the attempt to trace the course of philosophical progress or retrogression. The nature and scope of philosophy furnish reasons for the study of its history. Philosophy does not confine its investigation to one or to several departments of knowledge; it is concerned with the ultimateprinciples and laws of all things(Turner 1903).

Since one of the chief pre-occupation of philosophy is the analysis of concepts, interest in *ubuntu* is to establish the logical development and lay bare the hidden connections(Copleston 1962). Now as *ubuntu* is proving to be multi-dimensional and complex, there can never be any better justification for where it is coming from and what shades of meaning it has gathered along its wake.

The central question boils down to how the concept of *ubuntu* has gained currency as to appeal to so many perspectives. In pursuance of the objectives outlined above, the paper adopts the historical critical method to glean through the various approaches to the meaning of *ubuntu*. To this end, the paper shall be divided into four sections. The first deals with the manifestation of the concept of *ubuntu* from the various communities and traditions and its up surge in contemporary discourses. The second shall attempt a philosophical analysis of the concept. The third, examines the significance to the contemporary world. The last section ties all the loose ends together.

I: Etymology and Resurgence of the Concept

Ubuntu has been associated with the indigenous peoples of Africa south of the Sahara. The history of *ubuntu* is shrouded in ambivalence. Perhaps it is this exasperating situation which has led Bennett to this statement:

> It must be recognised at the outset, however, that it is impossible to trace the exact denotation of the word in its vernacular origins. Ubuntu is said, in a famous metaphor, to be shrouded in a "kaross of mystery"(Bennett 2011).

In the first instance, we are talking here of one of the unfortunate episodes of human history in which intellectual resources of a people - the indigenous African people, for so many years, have been disparaged due to western colonialism. Second we are talking of a plethora of linguistic communities such that attempts as homogeneity are but only ephemeral.Thirdly, we witnesspotentially ominous attempts, after the release from prison of Nelson Mandela, to identify with it! This creates the ambivalence – what do we mean by it?

In a bid to meet the challenge *a* number of scholars, notably Johan Cilliers consider *ubuntu* to be a very elusive concept, precisely because it has many shades of meaning – "a way of life, a universal truth, an expression of humanity, an underpinning of the open society, African Humanism, trust, helpfulness, respect, sharing, caring, community, unselfishness etc"(Cilliers 2008). Cilliers contends that the best rendition of the concept would be,'humanity or humanness'(Cilliers 2008). This approach to the meaning of *ubuntu* is corroborated by Claire Openheim, who contends that the concept is associated with the idea of community, humanness and harmony (Oppenheim 2012). Other scholars, notably Sigger et.al, invoke *ubuntu* as a solution to business related challenges(D.S. Sigger 2010).Given all these divergent perspectives, it is now confounding what the concept actually stands for in essence.Any critical reader naturally becomes sceptical of its practical efficacy.It is in the light of the nefarious problem associated with the meaning on *ubuntu* that the paper sets out to trace the history of the concept, highlight the innuendos; be them metaphysical, epistemological or ethical and also to examine the practical bearing of these diverse meanings on contemporary social life. Focus on *ubuntu* is necessitate in part, by the fact that scholarship on the concept has been dominated by non- Africans (C. B. Gade 2012).This is largely, due to the fact that indigenous Africans do not write about it. As late as 2012, Christian Gade laments the gape of indigenous African knowledge about ubuntu:

> But though ubuntu is generally held to stem from African indigenous culture, the academic discussion on ubuntu has been deeply influenced by works by non-Africans; understood as people who are not of African descent. In fact, as I will explain later in this article, my research even indicates that before the 1950s, all written sources mentioning ubuntu were authored by people of European descent. Similarly, much of the recent literature on ubuntu has been authored by non-Africans (C. B. Gade 2012).

Given the historical problem of suppression of African ideas in all areas spheres political, ethical and didactic, now that the problem is over, perhaps, it is time for an indigenous

African perspective on the same said subject too, as to enrich the understanding of the concept.

The paper advances the view that most scholars have tended to emphasize more on ethical dimension of ubuntu/hunhu than one epistemology, metaphysics and so forth. Some,for instance have considered the percepts of *ubuntu* to be fundamental in the quest for nation-building(van de Walt 2010), Nkhata refers to it as a "an African view of life and worldview"(Nkata 2010). Others have looked at *ubuntu* as a model for leadership and management which places moral incentives ahead of monetary ones (D.S. Sigger 2010) or as a spiritual ideal (Oppenheim 2012). Very few scholars such as Ramose (1999) have underscored the need to develop the Ubuntu perspectives of the philosophy.

Although scholars associate the term ubuntu with South African communities of Zulu and Sotho (Ramose: 1999; Gade: 2012), the concept has a much wider coverage in Southern Africa up to Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo. This section examines the works of six selected scholars on the history of the concept, namely Songolo (1981), Kamwangamalu (1999), Hailey (2008), Ntibagirirwa (2012) and Gade (2011; 2012; 2013).

I (a)   **Aliko Songolo: Ubuntu Existing Under Erasure**

The story of the denigration of the Africa and her intellectual resources is better captured by Aliko Songolo in the essay entitled *Muntu Reconsidered: From Tempels and Kagame to JanheinzJahn*(1981). Songolo contends that the work of Janheinz*Muntu* (1961), which heavily depended on two earlier authors Tempels and Kagame was, in general critical of the black (African) cultures particularly in the New World (Songolo 1981) For Songolo, *muntu* was not a new word in 1958, when Janheinz first published his book in German. The word was found in many African languages, meaning person (Songolo 1981). The term *muntu* was recognized by linguistic scholars in the 19th century studying Bantu languages. The term went beyond linguistics. (Songolo 1981). Between 1945 and 1956, Tempels and Kagamehas used the term to discuss the philosophy of the Bantu. According to Tempels, Bantu ontology was a system of interacting forces. For, Tempels among the Bantu, "Force is being and being is force"(Tempels 1959). Being was hierarchical (Tempels 1959).The higher the being, the greater the force. Spiritual beings were greater than merely physical entities (Tempels 1959). At the top of the ladder was God, the Creator. Below him were the patriarchs followed by ancestors and then humans in that order, with animals in between until we reach the least important natures such as pebbles or grains of sand (Tempels 1959).

Songolo claims that using ethnological data and methods, Tempels came up with a dubious philosophical theory (Songolo 1981). Alexis Kagame, although an indigenous African from Rwanda, was a disciple of Tempels and took it upon himself to validate Tempels' findings using the linguistic method, ethnology and philosophy (Songolo 1981). Many such studies were carried out all over Africa thereafter. Bantu Philosophy appears to be a liberal attempt to critique the works of earlier scholars. Tempels wanted to demonstrate that there were people in Africa, namely the Baluba who were not as primitive as originally assumed but had an elaborate system of logic and metaphysics. Although this was philosophy in the

embryonic stage compared to that of the elaborate West(Songolo 1981). Yet, the book was not intended for Africans. It is even doubtful if it is an instance of African philosophy.

The publication by Placide Temples of the seminal book, Bantu Philosophy (1959) heralds the first attempt in the Western world to acknowledge the presence of a certain systematic thought among the Africans:

> Perhaps the time has come to make our general confession; at any rate, it is time at least to open our eyes. All of us, missionaries, magistrates, administrators, all in directive posts or posts which ought to be directive, have failed to reach their "souls", or at any rate to reach them to the profound degree that should have been attained. Even specialists have left the question aside. Whether we state this merely by way of a frank admission, or avow it with contrition, the fact remains. By having failed to explore the ontology of the Bantu, we lack the power to offer them either a spiritual body of teaching that they are capable of assimilating, or an intellectual synthesis that they can understand. By having failed to understand the soul of the Bantu people, we have neglected to make any systematic effort to secure for it a purer and a more dynamic life (Tempels 1959).

This marks a sombre willingness by the West to listen to what Africa has to offer. However, as may be noted already, the Africans did not have agency (Kwashirayi n.d.). The Westerner was the one writing for the African and articulating the thoughts of the latter(Kwashirayi n.d.). To confirm this, Tempels had this to say:

> We do not claim, of course, that the Bantu are capable of formulating a philosophical treatise, complete with an adequate vocabulary. It is our job to proceed to such systematic development. It is we who will be able to tell them, in precise terms, what their inmost concept of being is. They will recognize themselves in our words and will acquiesce, saying, "You understand us: you now know us completely: you "know" in the way we "know". More than that, if we can adapt our teaching of true religion to what is worthy of respect in their ontology, we shall hear, in the same way in which it was given to me, such testimony as was given to me. "Now you deceive yourself no longer, you speak as our fathers speak, it always seemed to us that we must be right." (Tempels 1959).

Thus, according to Songolo, until the publication of Bantu philosophy, African ideas existed under erasure. Even, the publication by Tempels was very guarded, reluctant to ascribe respectability and authenticity to Bantu thought in general and *ubuntu* in particular.

I (b) **Kamwangamalu : Language Alone Cannot Exhaust the Meaning of Ubuntu**

Kamwangamalu took some time to study the meaning of *ubuntu* from an linguistic perspective and notes that there were variations in the meaning of the term in respective communities:

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> Morphologically, ubuntu, a Nguni term which translates as 'personhood', 'humanness', consists of the augment prefix u-, the abstract noun prefix bu-, and the noun stem -ntu, meaning 'person' in Bantu languages. The concept of ubuntu is also found in many African languages, though not necessarily under the same name. Quoting Kagame (1976), Yanga (1997:13) remarks that this concept has phonological variants in a number of African languages: umundu in Kikuyu and *umuntu* in Kimeru, both languages spoken in Kenya; bumuntu in kiSukuma and kiHaya, both spoken in Tanzania; vumuntu in shiTsonga and shiTswa of Mozambique; *bomoto* in Bobangi, spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo; *gimuntu* in kiKongo and giKwese, spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola, respectively (Kamwangamalu 1999).

One might also add that the Shona of Zimbabwe use '*hunhu*' for personhood, *munhu*, for person (Samkange 1980), and *zvinhu* for being in general (Chimuka 2001). What is crystal clear is that 'ubuntu' has various renditions in the various communities of the Southern Africa. Generally scholars have displayed a twin approach to the study of ubuntu; the general and the specific. The general approach maintains that the whole of Southern Africa has more or less the same meaning attached to the concept 'ubuntu''. Kamwangamalu represents the first perspective. The specific approach insists on a community or country specific meaning. Gade represents this second approach. However, while Kamwangamalu believes that these numerous expressions are but just variations of the same idea, Gade is sceptical of the possibility of sameness in meaning of the concept, given the vast expanse of space and time covered (C. B. Gade 2012). The latter decided to circumscribe the concept to apply only to South Africa. It appears to me that Gade's focus ends up being too restrictive given that *ubuntu* is not just a concept (Creff 2004), but a philosophy (Ramose 1999). It is a philosophy that history, through colonialism,has treated unkindly (Arowole 2010). Again it is a concept whose currency and authenticity(Wiredu 2007) can easily be lost! A case in point is the *ubuntu* software, which many indigenous Africans do not even know about, let alone identify with.

Kamwangamalu's wide coverage of linguistic manifestation of the concept in Southern Africa can deepen our understanding and deepen our horizons on the concept of *ubuntu*. He contends that from a sociological perspective the concept is multi-dimensional, covering the central aspects of the African worldviews (Kamwangamalu 1999). Essentially *ubuntu* is the fountain of values such as – humanness, virtue, dignity, respect and solidarity (Kamwangamalu 1999).

Although Kamwangamalu had focused on the linguistic aspects of *ubuntu*, he ends up suggesting the authentic meaning can only be exhumed from the wider African worldviews. This is significant in that it drives us to the view that the linguistic meaning of*ubuntu*is intricately connected to the moral connotations, the epistemological and metaphysical meanings. Thus, it is inadequate to focus studies on the African languages alone.

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I (c) **Wim van Binsbergen: The Values Contemporary Africans Ascribe to Ubuntu are not Connected with Pre-Colonial Traditions**

In an article entitled, *Ubuntu and the Globalization of Southern African Thought and Society* (2001), the author raises fundamental issues associated with the challenges surrounding the concept in a globalized environment. Van Binsbergen notes that interest in the concept of *ubuntu* has been revived in the last twenty of so years from the time of writing (van Binsbergen 2001). It has become handy in the context of independence from colonial rule. Whereas for politicians, it has become a concept for nation-building and self - determination; for the African scholars, it has become a symbol of perfect blitz before contamination by Westernization (van Binsbergen 2001).According to van Binsbergen, Africans believed that their cherished worldview still exists, especially in the rural areas least affected by European modernity(van Binsbergen 2001). It is from these values and beliefs that a blue print for the future Southern African states was believed to emerge – a blue print spurring the people into political, economic and social progress (van Binsbergen 2001). Van Binsbergen argues that ubuntu is that well-knit cluster of ideasbelieved to have the power to inspire development in the various Southern African communities. It was believed to possess the management ideologies for the sub-region(van Binsbergen 2001) .

However, van Binsbergen questions how ubuntu was geared to deal,for instance, with the post-apartheid situation in South Africa – a situation of a very powerful economy, highly industrialized, with a strong state, but designed to serve the interests of the minority at the expense of the black majority (van Binsbergen 2001). He questions further how *ubuntu* was going to deal with the complex matters of equality and historical injustice. In his own words:

> …the newlygainedconstitutional equality of all South African citizens; the rising expectationsamong Black people who have historically been denied the White minority'sprivileges of class and colour; the majority's simmering resentment, both aboutpast wrongs and about the slowness of present compensations and rewards; a driveamong individual Blacks to gain financial and occupational security as quickly aspossible; the highest rates of violent crime in the world today; and above all thegeneral traumatisation that comes with having lived under, and having survived, theapartheid state: being forced to realise that no amount of economic gain andpolitical power can erase the permanent damage to the personality through earlierhumiliation, oppression, exclusion, and loss – and the desparate question as to whatsource of wisdom, identity, meaning, salvation could heal such trauma. Thecontradictions which this combination of traits presents, have been manifest inmyriad forms over the past decade (van Binsbergen 2001).

For that to happen van Binsbergen continues to argue, there is need for the development of new social apparatus, that would be effective rearranging the social, judicial, economic and political sector as well as concepts new enough and capable of promising a better way of looking at life. Ubuntu was believed to meet the challenge(van Binsbergen 2001) .

Like Kamwangamalu before him, van Binsbergen analyses the concepts Ubuntu from its etymology and breaks it into its morphological components. He observes that the root –ntu is common in many Bantu languages from the Cape coast to the Sudan. Following the German linguist Bleek, van Binsbergen designated its meaning as humanity (van Binsbergen 2001). Notice that this rendition is at variance with Ramose (1999) and Ntibagirirwa (2012), who both refer to –ntu as being, in general.

Van Binsbergen, after reviewing *Ramose's Africa Philosophy Through Ubuntu* (1999), came to the observation that Ubuntu ought to have a global application:

> Ubuntu as a form of African philosophy thus blends in with other potential,imagined or actual gifts of Africa to the wider world: African music and dance, orality and orature, kingship, healing rituals in which trance and divination playmajor roles, a specific appreciation of time, being and personhood — all of themcultural achievements from which especially the North Atlantic could learn a lotand (to judge by the latter's dominant forms of popular music and dance throughoutthe twentieth century) is increasingly prepared to learn, in a bid to compensate suchspiritual and corporeal limitations and frustrations as may be suspected to hideunderneath the North Atlantic's economic, technological, political and militarycomplacency(van Binsbergen 2001).

Van Binsbergen is sceptical of the fact that the pre-colonial intellectual was very elaborate and well represented. In the end, he relegates to utopia, the attempts by contemporary Africans to link their visions, dreams and aspirations to their past, a view he shares with van den Berg(Van den Berg 1999). Van Binsbergencontends further that the cherished values which contemporary African scholars and politicians talk about are not instantiated in any particular community, but simply dreamt about(van Binsbergen 2001). However, van Binsbergen concludes that the concept ubuntu is usable in South Africa, not on account of the past it captures, but on account of the future it seeks to create. Ubuntu bear some utility in so far as it seeks to capture the commendable values believed to be found in the African traditions, but there is the danger of affecting the identities of other people in Southern Africa (van Binsbergen 2001). As a matter of fact *ubuntu* was not well represented during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as the Commission was composed of Christian leaders and not traditional priests and *sangomas(* traditional doctors or herbalists). Resultantly, this compromised the utility of *ubuntu* from a traditional point of view(van Binsbergen 2001).

Again as van Binsbergen sees it, *ubuntu* had a tricky character depending on who wants to use it and how:

… *ubuntu*often does serve as a liberating, empowering and identity-building transformativeconcept in the hands of those who wish to build the country. But it may also bewielded as a mystifying concept in the hands of those who, after the post-apartheidreshuffle, were able to personally cross over to the privileged side of the huge classdivide, without being over-sensitive to the wider social costs of their individualeconomic and status advancement. This process is widely noticeable in

SouthAfrica today. It is what people euphemistically call the Africanisation of that country's economic and public sphere. In such a situation of post-apartheid class formation, Africans with widely different access to power resources increasinglyconfront each other in conflict over scarce resources within industry, formal organisations, neighbourhood affairs and politics. Is there not the danger here of being turned into a populistic, mystifying ideology, dissimulating the real classconflict at hand, and persuading the more powerless Blacks involved to yield to themore powerful ones as soon as the latter wave the flag of Ubuntu?(van Binsbergen 2001)

The conclusion is that *ubuntu* has potential depending on how its put to use. However, in its general usage it may be usurped by cunning and power hungry politicians and be used not for the development of ordinary South Africans, but for personal aggrandizement. Thus he cautions against a sheepish appeal to tradition, when in fact this appeal would camouflage class, political and other social conflicts. He invites us to subject *ubuntu* to critical examination and use it carefully.

I (d)   **Hailey : Ubuntu a Concept Notoriously Dense and Open to Abuse**

Hailey (2008) has also done a major research for the Tutu Foundation by combing through the literature and trying to establish how *ubuntu* has been used and what practical bearings it has assumed(Hailey 2008). The study was embarked a bid to assist the Foundation determine a number of things: first, how to help the Foundation's thinking around the concept. Second, to guide the Foundation on how it could use the concept ubuntu in approaching its work of assisting communities in South Africa. Thirdly, to help come up with assessment tools used in community development projects and finally, to help the Foundation establish the practical bearings of *ubuntu* (Hailey 2008).

John Hailey, agrees with some scholars before him that *ubuntu* has diverse definitions (Hailey 2008). From the literature at his disposal ranging from government documents to the personal opinions, be observes that the meanings vary from actions done from the emotion of sympathy to essences of humanity (Hailey 2008). For, Hailey, there are the philosophical and theological connotations of ubuntu:

> Commentaries on *ubuntu* either see it in terms of a set of common characteristics or behaviours (valuing others, kindness, compassion, etc) or as representative of a wider value system or paradigm. It is increasingly used as a "catch-all" term used to characterise the norms and values that are inherent in many traditional African societies, and used to illustrate the way individuals in these communities relate to others, and the quality and character of their relationship(Hailey 2008).

In addition, Hailey notes a point very crucial to our discussion, that *ubuntu* represents a "wider worldview or belief system rather than just a set of discernible characteristics" (Hailey 2008). Following Louw (1998), Hailey observed also that *ubuntu* is the basis of African spiritual life:

> It is a multidimensional concept that represents thecore value of African ontology's – such as respect for human beings, forhuman dignity and human life, collective sharedness, obedience, humility, solidarity, caring, hospitality, interdependence, and communalism. Whilethese are all values that are valued in the west they are not emphasised to thesame extent. In the west we might talk of "I think therefore I am" whereas the*ubuntu* version would be translated as "I am human because I belong". Thus, *ubuntu* can be seen as a radical reflection of our humanity, yet also has theuniversal appeal of traditional community values (Hailey 2008).

Hailey concludes that *ubuntu* is not easy to condense. It pervades the whole African life including, the spiritual and practical life(Hailey 2008). The practical aspects of *ubuntu* include: the capacity to build communities committed to equality, justice and mutual care(Hailey 2008). However from the literature gleaned, *ubuntu* had its dark side – that of stifling the rise of individuals over and above their communities(Hailey 2008).

I (e)   Symborien Ntibagirirwa: Divorced from the Metaphysical Underpinnings, Ubuntu is Unfathomable

Ntibagirirwa (2012) also carried out significant research concerning the ontological aspects of ubuntu. Although writing primarily on cultural values as they relate to development, henotes that the concept pervades African life – the linguistic, the religious and the cultural (Ntibagirirwa 2012). He contends that *ubuntu* has a cosmological dimension, apart from the human aspect(Ntibagirirwa 2012). He argues that although many scholars have pointed at considerable diversity in the empirical manifestation of ubuntu, there is an ontological unity undergirding this apparent flux of diversity(Ntibagirirwa 2012).Ntibagirirwa chides Hountondji and others for attacking the idea of homogeneity in African thought:

> Diversity is a reality which cannot be denied in Africa. Yet Hountondji's idea that the vastmajority of anthropologists are simply forcing an artificial unity upon what is irreduciblydiverse is hardly acceptable. To remain at the level of Hountondji's affirmation is to underminethe whole endeavour of philosophy which consists in the search of the unity behind theobserved diversity, the One behind the many. The point is that the empirical observation is nota sufficient basis from which to appreciate the diversity or unity of Africans. The fact that thereare different personalities in a given family does not negate the reality of a family. To affirmthe reality of parts is not to deny the reality of the whole; nor is to affirm the reality ofcommunion (common-union) necessarily to negate the existence of individualities(Ntibagirirwa 2012).

For Ntibagirirwa, there is an overarching metaphysical backbone to the apparent diverse African cultures – a common worldview. He credits a number of scholars for this view. While Oladipo and Ramose point to a metaphysical root common to all Africans; Mudimbe and Sindima suggest that the discourses of otherness such as negritude, the beauty of black personality, African philosophy and African authenticity all point back to the idea of a unique metaphysical outlook(Ntibagirirwa 2012) . Further, Ntibarigirwa identifies the

ontological backbone of African metaphysics with view that the community is prior to the individual.He goes on to paint a broader cosmological framework into which all the other diverse perspectives fit and argues that ubuntu is an aspect of being, a view he shares with this author(T. A. Chimuka 2001) . For Ntibarigirwa, the cosmic community (being) is –ntu, among the Bantupeople.The human being or *muntu* is only a speck in the sea (Ntibagirirwa 2012). In general, being is divided into four main categories – muntu, kintu, hantu and kuntu all of which share the root word –ntu(Ntibagirirwa 2012). Following Kagame, the first category of being is concerned with intelligent beings, that is to say, humans –beings, whether dead, living or the yet-to-be-born(Ntibagirirwa 2012) . The second category deals with objects such as plants and animals, generally considered to be without intelligence(Ntibagirirwa 2012). This is followed by the last two categories, one (hantu) – having to do with the being of space and time, and kuntu – having to do with the mode of being(Ntibagirirwa 2012).Interestingly, all these categories are meshed together into some form of cosmic unity. However, earlier scholars, notably Kagame, thought it improper to make ubuntu another ontological category, but simply recognized it as a mental constructs – some form of predicate, but not a concrete object (Ntibagirirwa 2012).

Apparently, the Bantu made a distinction between concrete entities and their attributes. As Ntibagirirwa puts it:

> The Bantu distinguish between the concrete and the abstract. They distinguish between the abstract of accidentality and the abstract of substantiality. The abstract of accidentality expresses entities which do not exist independently in nature. In other words, entities expressedby the abstract of accidentality have no existence except in reference to some being(Ntibagirirwa 2012).

Furthermore, Ntibagirirwa contends that *ubuntu* qualifies to be regarded as an abstraction from the first category of being mentioned above. *Ubuntu* does not exist on its own, but is a set of properties of the substantive entity *muntu*. *Ubuntu* then constitutes a kind of mental representation of being, but is not being itself (Ntibagirirwa 2012).

Muntu has been mapped as the being with intelligence, but is a subset of being in general.There is also the theological dimension to all this; whether God is part of –ntu. Scholars of African philosophy are still disputing whether it is adequate to translate –ntu as being. Tempels had translated it to mean 'vital force' (Tempels 1959). However Vincent Mulago has objects to this (Ntibagirirwa 2012). Ntu includes within it only the created entities (Ntibagirirwa 2012). Kagame had emphasized that a chief characteristic of –ntu is to act and be acted upon(Ukwamedua 2011). God is considered the original source and as creator, the argument goes, He stands outside –ntu and His mode of being is different from that of the former(Ntibagirirwa 2012). The paper will not venture into the theological debate, but suffice to mention that *ubuntu* has allusions beyond ethics. But, from what Ntibagirirwa is saying, a fuller understanding of the concept of *ubuntu* must harness the metaphysical underpinnings in order to avoid being superficial. If this is anything to go by, then ubuntu must of necessity be associated with intellection. The values of humanness, unity and community are not instinctive but are results of well considered community ethos.

I (f) Christian Gade : Even the Indigenous Africans Cannot Define Ubuntu Without Equivocation

Finally, let me consider Christian Gadewho also contributed considerably to our understanding of *ubuntu*. Gade notes that in written form, ubuntu first appears in 1850 and generally referred to human nature or a character disposition (C. Gade 2011). He also notes that prior to 1980, there was not much controversy over the meaning of the term. At this juncture however, scholars were beginning to introduce the terms 'philosophy' and 'ethic' when applied to *ubuntu* (C. Gade 2011) . An avalanche of literature on ubuntu arose after the writing of the South African Constitution in 1993 and the term was surreptitiously smuggled into the epilogue:

> In the wake of the Epilogue's claim that there is 'a need for ubuntu,' a number of texts were published in South Africa, which sought to define what ubuntu is. The InterimConstitution does not define the term (C. Gade 2011).

It was Augustine Shutte, according to Gade, who popularized ubuntu as a moral concept. The idea of human nature has come to have its moral counterpart in ubuntu(C. Gade 2011). In 2012, Gade published another article on ubuntu in which he pursued the understanding of the concept by South Africans of African descent, since ubuntu is said to emanate from indigenous African cultures. His findings fall into two clusters – those who regarded ubuntu as a moral quality in persons and those who treated it as a philosophy, an ethic or a worldview (C. B. Gade 2012). Central to all this, according to Gade is the idea of a person, but the question what is a person has led to diverse responses. Some emphasized on blackness, but others confined it to anybody who behaved in a morally acceptable manner(C. B. Gade 2012). Gade contends that there is no simple way of deciphering the meaning of *ubuntu*, even if one were to go to the Africans themselves (C. B. Gade 2012). In the end we have the inclusive and the exclusive sense of what it means to be a person – the vector of *ubuntu*. Some respondents have allowed all humans beings to be persons qualifying to get the label persons, but others have said only some human beings are fit to be called as such:

> Based on myresearch, it is not possible to justify any quantitative claimsabout the extentof either inclusive or exclusive ideas about the nature of ubuntu. My point is simplythat there are some SAADs who have inclusive ideas about the nature of ubuntu,and some SAADs who have exclusive ideas(C. B. Gade 2012).

Gade's conclusion is that *ubuntu* is a contested terrain, even among peoples of African descent. Different ideas about the nature of *ubuntu* reside in the indigenous Africans themselves. He concludes thus:

> I amnot aware that other scholars are engaged in the projectof mapping out the entire landscape of different ideas about the nature of ubuntuthat are found among membersof the SAADs group. Accordingly, I hope that mymapwill be of interest to many people, and that it will be used as a background for developingmore detailed maps. Some of the findings that I have presented may

come as asurprise to people who have only taken an interest in some parts of the ubuntu landscape.Some may be surprised to find that that in addition to inclusive ideas about thenature of ubuntu, there are also exclusive ideas. The existence of exclusive ideas suggeststhat people should be careful not to over-romanticize SAADs' understanding ofubuntu. Both from a deontological and a consequentiatist point of view it would, as Ihave emphasized, make good sense to argue that in post-apartheid South AfricaSAADs' exclusive ideas about the nature ofubuntu are ethicallyillegitimate.

What is fascinating about Gade's conclusion is he Africans in the sub-region and beyond. If meaning of *ubuntu* is contestable, does this mean then that indigenous Africans have no claim to the meaning this term?

II: Contemporary Renditions of the Concept of Ubuntu

The survey has revealed that the term *ubuntu* is fraught with ambivalence and apparentcontradictions. From the linguistic approach, we see how the concept pervades the language communities we have seen that the concept appears variously in many linguistic communities. Generally it has been maintained that *ubunt*u, from the various languages has meant one or all of the following; humanness, unity or community. The history has also shown that *ubuntu* has been interpreted as a virtue, an ethic, or a worldview. As a worldview, it has not flourished due to colonial domination and marginalization (Msila 2007). However, it has sprung up during the days of African nationalism as a philosophy of liberation and a vision of better things to come. In Zimbabwe, for instance, it was seen as a model of governance and development (Samkange 1980).In South Africa, it was wedged into the constitution as a guiding principle in conduct (Mokgoro 1998).
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From the brief survey of the literature on the history of the concept 'ubuntu', we note that it has a chequered history. However, two major approaches of Ubuntu (i) as a philosophy and worldview and (ii) as a humanistic ethic have emerged. As a philosophy, ubuntu could be seen as a conscious attempt by the Bantu speaking people of southern and central Africa to defend their humanity which had been assailed by colonial and imperial forces. It is a metaphysically troubling point that the being of the indigenous peoples of the continent – their Africanness - was trashed and trivialised by others. The Westerners produced a society where the majority of the population would be under the cultural domination of a minority. In many instances, these colonial masters used divisive mechanisms to keep society segmented thereby maintaining their hegemony (Alemazung 2010). The removal of the burden of colonialism heralded the time and chance for the Africans to re-mould themselves around a philosophy they identify with, hence the appeal to ubuntu. The burden of contemporary scholars then is use the concept of ubuntu to re-construct and dignify the African image which had been battered by colonial oppression (Eleojo 2013). However, this can be done through recouping from the past and creatively projecting what is useful and relevant to contemporary life. The imperative however is to be cautiously pragmatic and open minded. To use Emmanuel Eze's phrase, we need to make 'explicit the conceptual diversity implicit in what we generally call cultural experiences' (Eze 2011)'. The pessimism exhibited by some scholars regarding the efficacy and practical usefulness of the

concept of ubuntu is not unfounded. Times have changed. We are now in the 21st Century characterised by globalization, sophisticated technologies and driven by the Western liberal worldview or Eastern communism. Where does ubuntu fit?

Ubuntu will always remain a set of idealized values for as long as they refer only to a pristine epoch before colonial domination (Nyaumwe n.d.). Nyaumwe contends that there is virtue in romanticising the values of ubuntu so as to bring out the positive aspects which can be filtered through and could be used in the present the future (Nyaumwe n.d.). In this respect ubuntu would operate as an ideology (Idoniboye-Obu 2013). Some scholars, notably Moeketsi Letseka, argue that the ubuntu need to be defended against undue assaults by those who argue against assigning a central role to it citing moral, political, epistemological and pedagogic errors (Letseka, In Defence of Ubuntu 2012). Ubuntu has an important role to play in integrating the various groups that had been put asunder by colonial policies of governance, into one nation (Letseka, In Defence of Ubuntu 2012). At this juncture in history where nation-building is a founding principle, the values of ubuntu such as: community, social interdependence and individual co-operation become indispensable (Letseka, In Defence of Ubuntu 2012). In this respect, ubuntu is an interactive ethic, where members of society improve their conduct through their dealings with one another. This point was advanced earlier by Mokgoro who regarded ubuntu as a humane feeling towards others (Mokgoro 1998). What Letseaka is saying here is very pertinent for the contemporary African situation – where we have societies ravaged by slavery, racism and domination of sorts needing healing. Hence ubuntu acts as plaster to bring together fractured elements. The relevance of ubuntu in national reconciliation, healing and citizen integration cannot be over-emphasized. Some point at the prevalence of violence in society as militating against the usefulness of ubuntu (Letseka, In Defence of Ubuntu 2012). Even in situations where African governments abuse power and deny citizens the enjoyment of their rights, ubuntu can still give its clarion call for humane considerations and avoidance of human-rights abuse. Perhaps the problems of violence as found in crime and Governments' hard handedness on citizens indicate some social forgetting (Letseka, Anchoring Ubuntu Morality 2013). Hence there is need to harness and employ education to cultivate the values of ubuntu in all citizens at all levels of moral development.

CONCLUSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE AND FUTURE OF UBUNTU

The survey has attempted to point at some of the nuances in the understanding of the concept ubuntu in history. It has come out that from the perspective of language and morality, ubuntu points to humane considerations in dealing with fellow human beings. A person becomes what he or she is through interaction with others. However, this understanding is anchored by certain metaphysical anchors. The inescapable fact has been that ubuntu pertains to the being of Africans in the world and what their views about well being, happiness and well-being. Despite being subjected to colonial domination and European modernity, ubuntu still has a place in ethics as it seeks to integrate members who had be dissipated by history. The passage of time does not seem to trivialize the integrative value of ubuntu. Importantly also, the propping of ubuntu does not make it a panacea for all social problems.

Although there are challenges in present day Africa, such as wars, violent crimes and oppressive governments, this does not diffuse the values of ubuntu in promoting cohesion, co-operation and mutual respect. Perhaps, more needs to be done to make ubuntu central in education, where citizens will be prepared for life in the wider community.

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