

AFRICAN ANTHROPOLOGY AS A RESOURCE FOR RECONCILIATION:

UBUNTU/BOTHO AS A RECONCILIATORY PARADIGM IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

This article explicates the concept of ubuntu/botho as a resource for social reconciliation, particularly in view of the South African context. The main tenets of ubuntu are discussed, as are some of its ethical implications. It is argued that ubuntu is an all-encompassing ethos underlying African social life. Though the aim of the article is to highlight positive aspects of ubuntu, some possible drawbacks of ubuntu are also mentioned. Ultimately, the purpose is to outline why it is justifiable to consider ubuntu as a reconciliatory paradigm.

Key words: African Anthropology, Reconciliation, South Africa, *Ubuntu*

An important resource for reconciliation that can be gleaned from African tradition is the African concept of humanity embedded in African anthropology (Mfutso-Bengo 2001:39-40). Possibly the most fundamental of all African anthropological notions is that of *ubuntu* or *botho*. Some argue *ubuntu* constitutes a crucial pillar of an African worldview (Battle 1997:39). As I argue here, it is a concept of reality which inherently carries with it powerful resources for social reconciliation. It is both a tool of social analysis and a way of life (Teffo 1995a). "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am," can be seen as its paradigmatic slogan (Mbiti 1969:108-109).¹

A major theme of African anthropology is the sacrality of life, and flowing from that, respect for the human person (Magesa 1998:55). Human dignity "is to be preserved at all costs, for a person's dignity is part of his immortal soul or life-essence" (Sidhom 1969:110). Moreover, a person is seen holistically – as an entity with physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual and social qualities, needs and abilities.² In the opinion of South African scholar Joe Teffo (1995b), "ubuntu/botho is the common spiritual ideal by which all black people South of the Sahara give meaning to life and reality" and can be deemed "the spiritual foundation of all African societies". Its historical origins can be traced to the ancient "African philosophy of unity in diversity" – a "philosophy of unity or oneness of

¹ "We say, 'a person is a person through other people.' ... 'I am human because I belong.'" (Tutu 1999:35) According to Sarpong (2004), "The African would say: *Cognatus sum ergo sum* (I am related; therefore I am)."

² The Pedi conception of a person avers that each individual – "*motho* – consists of a body – *mmele* – of a soul – *moya* – and a spirit – *seriti*" (Mönnig 1988:48). *Moya* and *seriti* are life-giving attributes, received from Modimo. *Moya* is associated with life itself, while *seriti* is associated with a person's image and name (Mönnig 1988:49-50). Due to the fact that African anthropology emphasises a holistic view of the person, Taylor (1965:96) claims it to espouse a deeply Christian concept of humanity.

the whole of creation" (Motshekga 1998:24) – which presumably originated long ago in Egypt and Ethiopia (1998:4).

Ubuntu is the 'common denominator' of all brands of African anthropology (as well as African religion and philosophy), and can be shared among all people, insists Koka (1998:34).³ As a universal philosophical concept, *ubuntu* embraces every human being, all races and nations – uniting them into a new universal 'Familihood' – where individuals, families, communities and nations would discover the vital fact that: they are an integral part(s) of each other (sic). (Koka 1998:34), *Ubuntu* "affirms an organic wholeness of humanity, a wholeness realised in and through other people" (Villa-Vicencio 1997:38). It is a 'latent force' within human beings which connects them to one another (Radley 1995). Therefore, *ubuntu* essentially is about interconnection and relationship – relationship between a person and his/her descendants, family, clan, antecedents and God, as well as with his/her inheritance, property and its produce (Mulago 1969:138, 143).⁴ As Sidhom (1969:102) puts it:

Existence-in-relation sums up the pattern of the African way of life. And this encompasses within it a great deal, practically the whole universe. The African maintains a vital relationship with nature, God the deity, ancestors, the tribe, the clan, the extended family, and himself. Into each avenue he enters with his whole being, without essentially distinguishing the existence of any boundaries dividing one from the other.

African anthropology is about participation – the principle which illustrates the interconnection of all forces and maintains and upholds the web of relationships. It is, one might argue, the "cohesive principle of the Bantu community" (Mulago 1969:137).⁵ Because all participate in the system of relationships, it is cohesive – solid, interrelated and unified. The 'unity of life' is seen to be 'the centre of cohesion and solidarity' (Mulago 1969:137).

Participation is the element of connection, the element which unites different beings as beings, as *substances*, without confusing them. It is the pivot of the relationships between members of the same community, the link which binds together individuals and groups, the ultimate meaning, not only of the unity which is personal to each man (sic), but of that unity in multiplicity, that totality, that concentric and harmonic unity of the visible and invisible worlds (Mulago 1969:145).⁶

The most elementary feature of *ubuntu* is its focus on community.⁷ Community is a 'fundamental human good' (Gyekye 1997:75) because it advocates "life in harmony and

³ For Africans, the "common denominator" of humankind is "Muntu" (Jahn 1961:18). Essential humanness or "Muntu" is a manifestation of "NTU", "the universal force as such". "NTU is the universe of forces" (:114). "It is Being itself, the cosmic universal force, which only modern, rationalizing thought can abstract from its manifestations. NTU is that force in which Being and beings coalesce. ...NTU expresses, not the effect of these forces, but their being" (:101). The other manifestations of NTU are Kintu, Hantu and Kuntu. Muntu is "an entity which is a force which has control over Nommo", "the magic power of the word" (:121). Kintu is those forces "which cannot act for themselves and which can become active only on the command of a Muntu". Hantu is "a force which localizes spatially and temporally every event and every 'motion'" (:102). Kuntu is an action that someone performs, such as laughing (:103).

⁴ "Two basic principles seem to underlie all the complex relationships into which man (sic) enters, namely, the principle of indwelling and the principle of interaction" (Sidhom 1969:102).

⁵ Teffo (1994c) also forwards the notion that *ubuntu* is a cohesive moral value.

⁶ Ubuntu creates a balance of material and spiritual realities (Battle 1997:37).

⁷ One explanation for this is suggested by ethnologists Van Warmelo and Phophi (1948:10-11), using the example of Venda society: "Struggling man (sic), beset by so many perils and hostile forces, sought security in social organization, first in the primordial unit of the blood group, then in the community of groups forming a tribal unit. If anyone was to be trusted it was the brother, the sister, the close kinsman, and so we find that the family and kinship are the basic facts of Venda life."

cooperation with others, a life of mutual consideration and aid and of interdependence" (1997:76). It fosters solidarity and participation, "fecundity and sharing in life, friendship, healing and hospitality" (Magesa 1998:55). *Ubuntu* favours communalism (community or collectivism) above individualism.⁸ Indeed:

there seems to be a consensus among such scholars as Nyerere, Nkrumah, Senghor and a host of others that man (sic) in Africa is not just a social being but a being that is inseparable from his community (Sogolo 1993:191).

Although 'communalism' may rightfully be deemed the dominant 'social theory' in Africa (Gyekye 1987:154)⁹, the concept of the community is not exclusive of the notion of the individual. Gyekye cites an Akan proverb to explain the relationship between the two: "The clan is like a cluster of trees which, when seen from afar, appear huddled together, but which would be seen to stand individually when closely approached" (1987:158). The fact that the clan is likened to a *cluster* of trees implies that it is indeed a unit, distinguishable as a unified whole. That it is likened to a cluster of *trees* suggests that the unit is undeniably made up of separate, autonomous entities. In other words, the community does not deny individuality, just as individuals cannot deny belonging to a community.¹⁰ Gyekye (1987:210) further explains:

In African social thought human beings are regarded not as individuals but as groups of created beings inevitably and naturally interrelated and interdependent. This does not necessarily lead to the submerging of the initiative or personality of the individual, for after all the well-being and success of the group depend on the unique qualities of its individual members – but individuals whose consciousness of their responsibility to the group is ever present because they identify themselves with the group. Some writers on African social thought and practice have failed to comprehend the nature of the relation between communalism and individualism as these concepts really operate in African societies. In African philosophy, as in African life, these concepts are not considered antithetical, as they are in European (both capitalist and communist) philosophies.

What all this intimates is that in Africa community defines the person, and not some isolated static quality of (individual) rationality, will or memory (Menkiti 1979:158). "Life together is the quintessence of an African understanding of what it means to be human" (Villa-Vicencio 1997:38). Fellowship is considered the most important or primary human need (Prinsloo 1998:53). The suffering of one is conceived as the suffering of all. Therefore, *ubuntu* may give rise to actions of self-sacrifice by individuals for the larger group.¹¹ Freedom from want takes precedence over freedom of choice (Teffo 1994b). *Ubuntu* strives for harmony and security offered by the group (Setiloane 1976:33, 37). It "rests on the pil-

⁸ According to Taylor (1965:78ff), "the individual" is an abstraction. Humanness manifests itself (only) in community. An individual disconnected (or expelled) from community is nothing (Taylor 1965:83).

⁹ Even in his later work (1997), Gyekye continues to defend moderate communitarianism (1997:35ff). Yet he cautions against an extreme or radical view of communitarianism as held by some Africans, where individual rights are reduced to secondary status. He affirms the importance of both communal values and individuality (1997:76). Indeed, if based on humanism, individuality and communitarianism are not in tension but rather complement each other (1997:288).

¹⁰ Such a view is similar to that propagated by the Biblical witness. In Pauline thought, the faith community is considered to be a body – the "body of Christ", i.e. it is one single interdependent unit, functioning as an autonomous entity. However, the different parts or members of the body are considered to have separate functions and purposes (gifts) which all together serve the entire body. See 1 Corinthians 12.

¹¹ In connection to this see Battle (1997:6) who argues that suffering is central to African religiosity, and that therefore the theology of the cross readily takes root in Africa.

lars of genuine caring and spontaneous sharing” (Broodryk 1997).¹² Given these features of *ubuntu*, one might agree with Teffo (1999:293) that its basis is love.¹³

According to Broodryk (1997), *ubuntu* philosophy promotes flexibility¹⁴ rather than stability, it embraces plurality, and it highlights the importance of the (extended) family.¹⁵ *Ubuntu* exhibits *simunye* – a spirit of oneness and inclusivity, *shosholozza* – teamwork, informality (e.g. through casual and spontaneous singing and laughing) and *toi-toi* dancing (which demonstrates a spirit of solidarity and togetherness). Moreover, the ideals of *ujima* (collective work and responsibility), *masakhane* (which means “let us build each other/build together”) as well as *ukuhlonipa* (respect, discipline and good behaviour) are characteristics of *ubuntu* (Koka 1998:31). Stewardship and collective hospitality are further traits (Mbigi 1995). In sum, *ubuntu* nurtures and exacts the skills of how to ‘relate properly’ (Mfutso-Bengo 2001:57).¹⁶

In discussing some of the most pertinent tenets of *ubuntu*, Prinsloo (1994) depicts a number of scholars’ deliberations about the concept. For example, Khosa likens it to universal brotherhood. Chinkanda claims it is about noticing the needs and wants of others. It is the freedom of Africans to run their own affairs, insists Buthelezi. Shutte asserts it is that which is distinctive, worthwhile, good and valuable in human life. According to Maphisa, it is rationality versus violence.¹⁷ It seeks to understand the frame of reference of others, suggests Makhudu. Mbigi maintains it is a code of trust, while Teffo argues it promotes the human as a social moral being. (Prinsloo 1994)

For Nyembezi (1977), *ubuntu* is “to live and care for others; to act kindly toward others; to be hospitable; to be just and fair; to be compassionate,¹⁸ to assist those in distress; to be trustful and honest; to have good morals”.¹⁹ To Teffo (1995a), the most admirable qualities of *ubuntu* include “justice, respect for persons and property, tolerance, compassion and sensitivity to the aged, the handicapped and less privileged, unwavering obedience to

¹² Kinoti (2000:27-34) and Koka (2002:47ff) also see caring in family and community as a prime African virtue.

¹³ Leopold Senghor similarly claims that love is “the essential energy” in Africa (Shorter 1978:53).

¹⁴ See Mfutso-Bengu (2001:54) who argues for the “African concept of time as a philosophy of flexibility”. He identifies this “philosophy of flexibility as pre-condition for reconciliation and compassion”. Flexibility is seen “as a moral category ... is an act of the heart and the will. To be flexible is to have a heart which can be moved”. A philosophy of flexibility opposes fundamentalism and fanaticism (Mfutso-Bengo 2001:55); it “is a fruit of encounter and leads to a reconciled society” (:56).

¹⁵ Gyekye (1997:292) sees this emphasis on family and kinship relations as an “outstanding cultural value”.

¹⁶ Here is an excerpt from a poem by Michel Kayoya (quoted in Shorter 1978:89):

This cloak must cover our own hearts
Our conception of ubuntu (human qualities)
Our love of ubuvyeyi (parental dignity)
Our practice of ubufasoni (nobility of origin)
Our sense of ubutungane (integrity)
The respect for Imana (God) – our father’s legacy to us.

¹⁷ Rational behaviour is a human trait, while violent behaviour is animal. Battle agrees that *ubuntu* counters a “cosmology of violence” (Battle 1997:9).

¹⁸ *Ubuntu* embraces “reconciling diversity through human encounter and compassion” (Mfutso-Bengo 2001:42).

¹⁹ A good person is defined as “generous – with his (sic) time, his concerned involvement with others’ troubles, and with his worldly goods. Generosity was the chiefly virtue *par excellence* and every man (sic) strove to act like a chief. ... A good man was one who was a good neighbour. ... The virtues of the good man were ... respect for seniors, loyalty to kinsmen, assistance to neighbours, freedom from the suspicion of witchcraft, generosity, meticulous observance of custom, loyalty to the chief and political officers, kindness and forbearance.” (Hammond-Tooke 1993:99)

adults, parents, seniors and authority,²⁰ courtesy, reliability, honesty and loyalty". A person following the norms of *ubuntu* is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, affirming of others, and sees him/herself as belonging to a greater whole (Battle 1997:35). *Ubuntu* represents solidarity, collective effort, equal contribution, mutual trust, and fair discipline (Radley 1995). Every effort at maintaining solidarity, improving communication and circulation of life is viewed as an exercise in "increasing vital force and preventing the diminution of life" (Mulago 1969:149; see also Tempels 1969). At base, *ubuntu* is about practicing the skill of building and maintaining relationships (Mfutso-Bengo 2001:57).

The ethics of *ubuntu*

In view of all the above considerations, *ubuntu* is not only an anthropological principle, but provides the basis for ethics and morality as well. Wiredu's assertion, "A human being needs help" is the point of departure for deliberations about ethics in Africa (Prinsloo 1998:54). *Ubuntu* is a social ethic with a reconciling vision for all of humanity (Teffo 1999:299).²¹ Gyekye argues that morality in Africa has a social and humanistic basis (1987:143).²² It does not originate from divine pronouncements, "but from considerations of human welfare and interests" (1987:208). All ethical and value systems exist "to reinforce unity and communal life", to "seek to create a climate for life in fellowship" and to encourage "mutual participation, exchange and cross-fertilization" (Eiselen and Schapera 1956:270). "Good" actions are "supposed (expected or known) to bring about or lead to social well-being" (Gyekye 1987:132).²³ Therefore, African ethics may be viewed as a form of character ethics (Gyekye 1987:147-148).

In African society, ethics is a structured system "in the light of which each individual knows where he stands" (Sidhom 1969:112). The aim and purpose of ethics "is nothing less than the restoration of relationships within the immediate community" (:113), in view of the fact that community life is constantly threatened by disturbances and forces of chaos. Such forces are considered evil because they disrupt "the otherwise normal flow of life and force of the universe" (:113). Connected to the idea of evil (or forces of destruction) is sin. According to theologian Thias Kgatla (1992:328), Africans perceive sin as

a transgression of the ethical laws and norms derived from the ancestors.²⁴ Sin constitutes an offence against the human group as a whole, and still further against the ancestral spirits. Sin is inherently the destruction of the group's solidarity, so that a person sins, not against God, but against others.²⁵

²⁰ Arguably, "life is viewed as a structure of roles and functions" (Sidhom 1969:106). Sidhom (1969:107) asserts that "grouping the community according to age defines the vertical as well as the horizontal relations within the community". African society is thus fairly structured and "regimented".

²¹ See also Kanyandago (1994:49).

²² However, it does not adhere to what Gyekye calls an "antisupernaturalistic" humanism, as practised in the West.

²³ Hammond-Tooke (1993:97) asserts, "Moral behaviour is ... essentially concerned with 'good' actions." "How did the Southern Bantu conceive of the 'good' man (sic)? Firstly, the good man was one who did not disturb the delicate balance between society and nature."

²⁴ Good ethics and morality "is measured by conformity to tribal ethics and laws"; violation against tribal custom is not sin against God but against the community (Buys and Nambala 2003:6).

²⁵ "The social order is based on the ontological order. Every organization, political or other, which offends this principle could not be recognized by the Bantu as orderly or normal. ... The social order is founded on vital union, the growth of the inner self and the interdependence of vital influence. Ethics and law follow logically from the conception of beings and their ontic connection" (Mulago 1969:150).

An offence is not seen in isolation from the broader context. As a result, in Africa an offender “does not stand alone in guilt”. His/her family, the community, share in it (Sidhom 1969:112).

Sin is anything that causes disharmony and disturbance – be it socially, physically, environmentally, etc. It is therefore also related to illness or lack of health (Kgatla 1992:328). Taboos, prohibitions and bans are similarly to be understood in this context of counterbalancing forces that seek to diminish vital force (Mulago 1969:150). Disruption caused by sin must be counteracted through correct behaviour by setting relations right. Such a view reveals what Adegbola (1969:116) calls an ‘ethics of dynamism’. Or, it may be deemed an ‘ontological, immanent and intrinsic morality’ (Kuckertz 1981:86, referring to Tempels).

Ubuntu as all-encompassing ethos

What Johann Broodryk (1997) calls ‘Ubuntuism’ is a philosophy with tenets broadly comparable to those of socialism and democracy.²⁶ At the same time, it manifests aspects of intense humanism.²⁷ Teffo (1995a), who similarly equates *ubuntu* with a kind of African humanism, declares, “The essence of Man (sic) in African Humanism lies in the recognition of man as man – before economic, financial and political factors are taken into consideration. Man is an end in himself. He is a touchstone of value.” Indeed, “Ubuntuism ... does not deal with political aspects only but is something more holistic in the sense of converging the institutional, physical, economical, financial and socio-welfare fields” (Broodryk 1997). *Ubuntu* is ‘participatory humanity’, which strives at all times to seek consensus and unanimity among people (Teffo 1994a). *Ubuntu* ultimately prepares the way for reconciliation in the context of justice (Teffo 1994a). Wiredu (1977:49-50) concurs that a fundamental trait of “traditional culture is its infinite capacity for the pursuit of consensus and reconciliation”.²⁸

How does all this relate to the South African situation? Broodryk (1997) argues that Ubuntuism is en route to becoming “the philosophy of the New South Africa”. It is ‘a process and philosophy which reflects the African heritage, traditions, culture, customs and beliefs’, and has represented the “moral guideline of traditional life for centuries”. *Ubuntu* is not an ideology, since it is universal²⁹ and does not seek to benefit certain people at the expense of others. “It is never to the detriment, or at the expense, of others” (Radley 1995). Good neighbourliness, decent behaviour, an emphasis on brother- and sisterhood and positive human relations are to be found among many Bantu ethnic groups in Southern Africa (i.e. Sotho, Xhosa, Shangaan, Venda etc.), claims Broodryk. For this reason, he speaks of its “universal applicability”, and its inherent compatibility with all religions. Through its ideals of sharing, respect, humanness and order, it has the force to transform South Africa (Broodryk 1997). Teffo (1994a) agrees with such a bold assertion when he states:

²⁶ It must be noted that Broodryk distinguishes between consensus and a rigid form of democracy. *Ubuntu* is in favour of the former rather than the latter. Agreeing with Broodryk, Gyekye (1997:116) asserts the democratic character of traditional African political systems. See also Goba (1995).

²⁷ See also Vilakazi (1991) and Teffo (1994c). Similarly, according to Gyekye (1997:260), Africans foster a “humanist moral outlook”.

²⁸ Tutu concurs that the main thrust of *ubuntu* is for reconciliation (Battle 1997:40).

²⁹ Teffo (1995a) would say it is “transcultural” in nature.

The ethos of *ubuntu*, that human essence by which man (sic) is prompted to do that which is honourable, correct, and proper³⁰, is one single gift that African philosophy can bequeath to other philosophies of the world, in particular Western philosophy.³¹

Villa-Vicencio has tried to encapsulate and define the concept of *ubuntu* in socio-political expressions. He maintains that South Africa would do well in establishing a “heritage which proclaims a message about human nature which provides an alternative to both western notions of individualism and ideological Marxist perceptions of collectivism” (Villa-Vicencio 1992:164). This means that South African society should strive to transcend both individualism and (rigidly Marxist) collectivism (:154ff) in order to model ‘a new vision of humanity,’ namely ‘a communal vision.’ It is this idea of a communal vision for humanity in South Africa that corresponds with the notion of *ubuntu*.³² The interconnectedness that *ubuntu* stands for is what South African society needs. The whole community needs to be shaped into a unified, reconciled web of interdependent existence. Effectively, South Africans need to learn the ‘art of living together’ (:77).³³

The ‘Ubuntu Pledge’ can be viewed as one example of how the philosophy of *ubuntu* has already been adopted for the social and political transformation of South Africa. The pledge pamphlet, presented by the National Religious Leaders’ Forum and supported by the Masakhane Campaign, could be obtained and signed at the voting stations during the last national elections in South Africa. It is “A pledge for a better South Africa”. The definition of *ubuntu* shown on the pledge pamphlet states: “Ubuntu means to be human, to value the good of the community above self-interest, to strive to help other people in the spirit of service, to show respect to others and to be honest and trustworthy.” Aspects of the pledge include:

I shall strive to:

Be good and do good. ...

Live honestly and positively. ...

Be considerate and kind. ...

Care for my sisters and brothers within the human family. ...

Respect other people’s rights to their beliefs and cultures. ...

Care for and improve our common environment. ...

Promote peace, harmony and non-violence. ...

Promote the welfare of South Africa as a patriotic citizen.

(Ubuntu Pledge pamphlet)

³⁰ Doing what is proper arises out of “respect for tribal law and custom” and honouring the ancestors “by living as they have lived”. Moral behaviour is demanded “within the family and tribe rather than moral behaviour in general” (Eiselen and Schapera 1956:270).

³¹ Arguably, a form of *ubuntu* was also practiced by Thomas Merton and Martin Buber, and certain other proponents of Western humanism, who emphasised the sanctity of life. In this, Teffo (1994a) sees possible convergences for cross-cultural dialogue. Furthermore, *ubuntu* ought to be and is applied in modern “Western” disciplines, for example in business ethics.

³² Moreover, such a vision can be compared to the one propagated by the Biblical heritage. Villa-Vicencio (1992:165) draws parallels between Biblical and *ubuntu* politics when he claims, “The message contained in the biblical vision of society is a message concerning the individual worth and dignity of all people, *realized in community with others*. More specifically, it is a heritage grounded in the story of people who are the focus of God’s special care, despite their lowly and despised status in the world – whether they be slaves in Egypt, the poor of Israel, widows, orphans, the sick or the oppressed of society.”

³³ Villa-Vicencio has a section in his book entitled, “Politics as the art of living together.”

Desmond Tutu is perhaps the most ardent advocate of *ubuntu* in South Africa. To him, *ubuntu* is about unifying apparent opposites, joining together instead of separating entities that are seemingly irreconcilable. *Ubuntu* offers no room for ‘us versus them’ thinking or rhetoric. Rather, it exacts the realisation that ‘my’ or ‘our’ humanity “is caught up, inextricably bound up, in theirs. We belong in a bundle of life” (Tutu 1999:34-35). Therefore, with reference to the hostile divide between blacks and whites, oppressed and oppressors, victims and perpetrators in South Africa, Tutu (1999:35) boldly asserts:

Ubuntu means that in a real sense even the supporters of apartheid were victims of the vicious system which they implemented and which they supported so enthusiastically. Our humanity was intertwined.

In view of our country’s unhappy past, *ubuntu* means the people of South Africa “are interconnected in this network of interdependence and togetherness, so that what happened to one, in a very real sense happened to them all” (Tutu 1999:127). In other words, *ubuntu* can help South Africans realise that they belong to one another (despite all outward signs of enmity and division), that they share a common history as well as a common future, and that they are dependent on each other for their collective well-being.

According to Michael Battle (1997), Tutu is a proponent of what could be called ‘ubuntu theology’. This is a theology emphasising that all human beings are created in the image of God. “Tutu turns the concept of ubuntu into a theological concept in which human beings are called to be persons because we are made in the image of God,” claims Battle (1997:64).³⁴ Other theologians, too, perceive *ubuntu* to be the African equivalent of the theology of the *imago Dei* (see for example Moyo 2002:298). According to Koka (1998:34), *ubuntu* is a special “embodiment of God’s ‘image and likeness’, his power and divinity in man (sic).”³⁵ *Ubuntu* highlights that “quality about a person which elevates him (sic) to a plane very near to godliness,” claims Mogoba (1981:56).

In Tutu’s view, besides stressing human beings’ likeness to God, “the reality of ubuntu is bound up in Jesus, who creates new relationships in the world” (Battle 1997:73). *Ubuntu* is seen as a metaphor for “human participation in the divine life” (Battle 1997:57). The fullness of humanity only becomes manifest in *koinonia*, in community. Indeed, Tutu declares, “God has made us so that we will need each other. We are made for a delicate network of interdependence” (Battle 1997:35). What this implies is that “human identities are uniquely made to be more cooperative than competitive” (:79).

Tutu ultimately sees “ubuntu as life in relation to God and neighbour” (Battle 1997:9). *Ubuntu* theology has the ability of restoring humanity and dignity to both perpetrators and victims of violence, and of creating a sense of mutuality among humans who are alienated from one another (Battle 1997:5). *Ubuntu* is the force that is able to bridge the terrible rifts created by the injustices and inhumanities of the past. It is in fact the force that ultimately counterbalances the evil of apartheid. South African writer Antjie Krog (2003:159) reflects, “Ubuntu. The most profound opposite of Apartheid. More than forgiveness³⁶ or reconciliation. More than ‘turn the other cheek’. It is what humanity has lost.”

³⁴ Other African theologians agree when declaring, “We are convinced that the Bantu principle of vital participation can become the basis of a specifically African theological structure. ... Communion as participation in the same life and the same means of life will, we believe, be the centre of this ecclesiological theology” (Mulago 1969:157). However, there are also critics of Tutu’s theology, e.g. Mosala and Cone (Battle 1997:155ff).

³⁵ Indeed, in African thought, spiritual life and biological life “meet in the human being” (Jahn 1961:107).

³⁶ To a victim of apartheid crimes, “forgiveness is creating a culture of ubuntu, humanness, medemenslikheid...” (Krog 2003:157, quoting Deborah Matshoba in an interview with this survivor of torture).

Ubuntu theology, therefore, has many possible advantages. For one, “out of the confidence of being God’s viceroy persons in the community of ubuntu are moved to care for others” (Battle 1997:48). *Ubuntu* builds up interdependent community (:40), cherishes diversity in community (:42), encourages transformation into a new identity (:44) and integrates cultures (:45). Before the commencement of the new dispensation in South Africa, Tutu even argued that *ubuntu* theology could be a force to ‘overthrow Apartheid’ through humanising the oppressor and establishing a sense of all South Africans belonging to one another (:47). As such, *ubuntu* theology imparts a “paradigm of reconciliation” (:80), which is sorely needed and can be adopted by South Africa. “An African sense of community includes rather than separates. Herein is a basis for building a common South Africanness – a basis for sharing stories that transcend the isolation of the past in the pursuit of reconciliation” (Villa-Vicencio 1997:39).

Possible drawbacks of *ubuntu*

Lest we fall into the trap of glorifying and romanticising *ubuntu* beyond what is realistic, it is necessary to at least mention some of its potential pitfalls. It is important to acknowledge that *ubuntu* can be abused (Sindane 1994). An extremist view of *ubuntu* declares that humanness manifests itself only in community, and that an individual disconnected (or expelled) from community is nothing (Taylor 1965:83). This can have two negative results. First, persons can be marginalised by virtue of their individuality. What Van Niekerk (1994) calls the “dark side of ubuntu” includes harshness or unkindness against dissenting individuals, i.e. those who do not tow the line that the community dictates.³⁷ In instances where not towing the community line involves criminal or otherwise destructive behaviour, marginalisation may be seen as a form of justifiable punishment or rehabilitation. It may be seen as therapeutic for and protective of the society, and may in fact be necessary (e.g. imprisonment of criminals or institutional rehabilitation of mentally instable people who cause harm). Yet if people are marginalised for reasons other than social disruption or danger, this is cruel.

Although Gyekye is in favour of moderate communitarianism (1997:35ff), he cautions against an extreme or radical view of communitarianism as held by some Africans, where individual rights are reduced to secondary status. The reduction or obliteration of individual rights and freedoms may be deemed a second possible harmful effect of radical communalism.³⁸ The flip side of this is that individuals’ personal responsibilities and duties may also become eroded, or relegated to the background. In certain instances, *ubuntu* may bring about a clash between the sensibilities of group solidarity and personal responsibility (Van Niekerk 1994). For example, in university settings an extreme form of *ubuntu* may call for a ‘pass one, pass all’ policy. Here, the desires of the group are elevated above individual efforts, responsibilities and duties. Surely this is an extreme or wayward expression of *ubuntu* that ought not to be tolerated.

In traditional African society, social hierarchies are common (Taylor 1965:84). A person’s social status is strongly determined by his/her class, rank, age and sex (Mönnig 1988:329). These categories are socially constructed. They can be exclusive and, if applied rigorously, ruthless. Some examples: Persons belonging to a certain (low) class may never be afforded the same kind of respect and dignity from others, as persons belonging to a

³⁷ Indeed, Africans may display the tendency to exclude outsiders (Gyekye 1997:256).

³⁸ For this reason, Gyekye affirms the importance of both communal values and individuality (1997:76), and sees them in complementarity rather than mutual exclusion.

higher class, something which may cause jealousy, resentment, and even hate. If a person of seniority abuses his/her power, persons of younger age are expected to accept this without resistance. Under such circumstances, terrible cruelty may be committed (e.g. child abuse or wife battering). Because of the hierarchy of the sexes, women are usually regarded as lower in status. This vulnerability is shown in the fact that many African women are victims of violence – domestic and institutional. Women furthermore are not allowed to participate in important decision-making processes that affect them, and are therefore sometimes misrepresented. African feminists decry the inherent sexism found in certain aspects of traditional culture, and many strongly reject it as oppressive and dehumanising.

Since family and kin represent the inner circle of Africans' community-orientation, the danger of nepotism arises.³⁹ Nepotism, and in some cases tribalism (where one tribe provides for itself to the detriment and exclusion of others tribes or ethnicities), stems from the honourable desire to show respect and kindness to one's closest community members. Yet it unfortunately is exclusive of those who do not belong in that category.⁴⁰ Ultimately it is unfair to those who do not have family-, kin- or clan-members in powerful places, since they will never have representation there, and will never be able to occupy those places themselves. As potential negative outcomes of a narrow and restricted understanding of *ubuntu*, nepotism and tribalism ultimately cause hostility and ill-feeling, not to mention bribery, corruption and general break-down in the broader community.

Even the great advocate of *ubuntu*, Tutu, uncovers a weakness in it by stating that it sometimes "encourages conservation and conformity". This can stifle personal creativity and expression. For this reason, "It needs to be corrected by the teaching about [each individual's] inalienable uniqueness.... We need both aspects to balance each other" (Battle 1997:xiii). Wiredu, too, warns of the danger of *ubuntu* in potentially undermining individual freedom, especially in contexts of authoritarian political rule (Battle 1997:51). Contrary to its ethos of inclusivity and acceptance, *ubuntu* may at times become exclusive of 'other' ethnic groups. For example, in the case of both the Zulu and Pedi languages, ethnic groups other than themselves are classed as non-persons (Mogoba 1981:57). 'It is a great problem in Africa, and here in our own country especially, that people want to separate themselves into little groups. Such groups can become exclusive,' admits Koka (07.07.2004). Yet he maintains that in fact such exclusivism is a perversion of the true African way. He ultimately defends *ubuntu* by insisting, "The notion of Africanness is inclusive."

Why is *ubuntu* a resource for reconciliation?

Using a formulation of the Summary Report from the Lutheran World Federation Working Group on African Religion (2002:23), I try to pinpoint why I believe African anthropology can make a significant contribution to the problem of social reconciliation:

This optimistic anthropology is one of the treasures which Africans could fruitfully appropriate to regain confidence in the human ability to confront and overcome social problems.

African tradition focuses on social relationships, and the healing of broken relationships. In appropriating 'this human-centred approach' to life (Summary Report 2002:23), South African society might be able to redirect its efforts with regard to reconciliation. Moreover, African anthropology's positive and affirming view of humankind may help to

³⁹ Sadly, cases of nepotism and tribalism abound in Africa. See for example Ayittey (1999) and Leistner (2003).

⁴⁰ Koka is one Africanist who vehemently rejects such forms of exclusivism (see interview, 07.07.2004). He deems them decidedly un-African, although he grants that some Africans are guilty of them.

overcome feelings of disappointment in and frustration about people; it may counteract feelings of resentment, antipathy or anger, but also feelings of inadequacy, guilt and shame. It may even foster a willingness to forgive and to give someone a 'second chance'. Essentially, it has the potential to restore lost hope in humanity and its ability to do and be good. *Ubuntu* will expect the best, hope for the best and bring out the best in people. *Ubuntu* does not give up on people, and it does not despair in their failures and inadequacies. For these reasons, I consider it an outstanding resource and basis for reconciliatory endeavours in South Africa, but also in other contexts.⁴¹

According to Lederach (1997:84), in order to provide an environment for sustained reconciliation and peacability to thrive, an 'infrastructure for peacebuilding' needs to be built. "Such an infrastructure is made up of a web of people, their relationships and activities, and the social mechanisms necessary to sustain the change sought. This takes place at all levels of the society." It seems to me that the African anthropological resource of *ubuntu* provides such an infrastructure; it champions a paradigm of reconciliation which may lead South African society on the way to peace and social harmony. Moreover, one can argue that *ubuntu* creates 'a spiritual culture' that has the potential to pave the way for a social scenario of co-operation and respect, harmony and peace (Koka 1998:34). Put differently, *ubuntu* promotes "an African spirituality of compassionate concern" (Battle 1997:123ff), and is therefore undoubtedly a boon to societies marked by a history of compassionlessness and indifference from the side of the powerful.

Conclusion

It has been the task of this essay to divulge some of the tenets of an African worldview that could provide positive resources for social reconciliation in the South African context. I have considered some contributions to be gleaned from African anthropology and ethics. Throughout, I have tried to demonstrate that certain aspects of these pillars of an African worldview may present a strong foundation and offer an effective impetus for social reconciliation endeavours.

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⁴¹ Hay (1998:136) agrees when asserting, "In South Africa today, the nation needs this, not only traditional people. ... Many people in SA have lost their *ubuntu* through the violence of apartheid and related violence and need their humanity to be restored."

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