

SERITHI/ISIDIMA:

REFLECTIONS ON HUMAN DIGNITY IN SOUTH AFRICA FROM A BLACK AFRICAN¹ PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper engages in a critical reflection on the notion of human dignity, whilst remaining aware of the notorious difficulty of defining dignity in a systematic way. The paper highlights the inherent historical tension and even contradictions regarding the concept, especially when viewed in the light of the experience of black Africans and the experience of colonization and oppression. The cosmological view of human dignity expressed by the metaphors of 'serithi/isidima' is investigated and utilized to challenge certain contemporary understandings of human dignity.

Key Words: *Serithi, Isidima*, Human Dignity, Democracy, Spirituality

Introduction

The position assumed in this paper is that the meaning of dignity, from a black African perspective, should be sought in the interconnectedness of humans and the whole of creation and a life that is radiated by the ancestors, who are the 'shades' of life. A life 'shaded' by the guardians of life, the ancestors, radiates and exudes a fragrant harmony of the conviviality of all spheres of life, which is a gift from God or the gods. This position is assumed with a clear conscience, given that the notion of dignity is notoriously difficult to define. *Serithi*, a Sesotho word, and *isidima*, an isiXhosa word, are used heuristically to translate the word 'dignity' in an imaginative way – using another isiXhosa word, *isithunzi*, meaning 'shade', in the context of a post-apartheid South Africa.

This paper engages in a conversation between the Western understanding of human dignity and the experiences of black Africans. I purposively draw from Enrique Dussel's (2003) explication of the notion of human dignity as an entry point for a discussion of human dignity from a black theological perspective. The use of African words or terms for dignity, namely, *serithi* or *isidima* is intended to assert not only the need for African symbols and expressions in the quest for the dignity of black Africans, but also to suggest that there are deeper cosmological questions implied by these symbols. I then conclude the

¹ Since the debate between Black and African Theologies which ultimately shows that both schools are not exclusive to each other, I have preferred to use the phrase 'black African' to demonstrate that our approach in this paper does not regard them to be exclusive, one against the other. The phrase 'black African' is used to show that there is no fundamental distinction we need to make between liberation and inculturation. I am also aware of the recent development in South Africa where Africans are now distinguished from the so-called coloured people and Indians, which groups were designated as blacks within the school of Black Theology of liberation. The phrase 'black African' should not be treated as an attempt to distinguish blacks from other groups that we understand to be black, but rather as an inclusive phrase for the methodological approach that perceives Black and African theologies as 'soul mates'.

paper by trying to understand constitutional democracy from this perspective and also its implications for public theology in South Africa.

The Idea of ‘Human Dignity’

The idea of human dignity suggests that human beings occupy a special place in God’s creation. Often when the subject of dignity is broached, the teaching of the *imago Dei* – that is the image of God – is appropriated to define human dignity by Christian writers, such as Burrow (2002) and Shannon (2004). The notion of human rights has also informed many discussions among secular thinkers on the subject of human dignity in our times.²

Conscious of these discourses around *imago Dei* and human rights, which in fact offer a good understanding of the notion of human dignity, it should be stated that as our starting point there is a sense, generally speaking, that human beings have for many centuries understood themselves to be different from all other creatures, if not actually better than all the creatures of the world.

This is how we formulate our conversation, the self understanding of human beings in relation to the whole of life. For example, Immanuel Kant (in Rachels & Rachels, 2007, p. 130) once wrote: “But so far as animals are concerned, we have no direct duties. Animals ... are there merely as a means to an end. The end is man.” Hence, the ‘end-means’ starting point is not only instructive, but it also has some importance as a useful tool in a variety of cultures. We should read this to include other life forms such as plants or beings that are non-human unlike Kant’s quotation above. However, the idea of human beings as ‘the end’ in the created world rather than the means to an end is built on a number of tenets. To support this view it is asserted that human beings have desires and goals and this makes them different. Other creatures or beings can thus be exploited as means by human beings to achieve their goals. In other words, other creaturely beings are a means to accomplish human goals and desires. It is further argued that self-consciousness distinguishes human beings from other creatures, and supports the idea of human dignity. Human ends and desires consign value to other creatures that are non-human as long as they are utilized for human ends.

The fact that human beings are regarded as rational beings means they have a dignity as free agents, capable of making their own decisions. They are able to set their own goals and guide their conduct by reason, thus supporting the argument that human beings should be viewed as being above all other creatures. Even though our world has now changed, as these views are certainly challengeable, we present this view on dignity as our starting point – the ‘means-end’ dimension of the argument. The point we need to accentuate for now is that the idea of human beings as somehow above all other non-human creatures has been pervasive and that this view may be equally true in the African worldview, which places human beings at the centre of the universe.

² In 2007, the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the South African Human Rights Commission and the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights celebrated the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and held roundtable discussions on the theme “Dignity and Justice for all of us.” In the papers presented, dignity is discussed from the point of view of human rights, without defining what dignity actually is. Cf. Gotesky & Laszlo (1970) in which William Black addresses the human rights question. Also see Murithi (2007) even though he discusses the notion of international human rights standards and offers *ubuntu* as a notion that can re-inform our understanding of human rights.

Valadier (2003, p. 55) renders the understanding of dignity in the following manner:

So dignity is not an attribute peculiar to persons and their singularity; it is a relationship, or rather it manifests itself in the gesture by which we relate to others to consider them human, just as human as we are, even if appearance suggests non-humanity, indeed inhumanity.

The point stated above is that no single human being can claim dignity as their personal attribute. These sentiments suggest that relations act as a qualifier for dignity. It is difficult to avoid drawing a parallel between the statement above and the African notion of *ubuntu*, which is correlated to the statement *motho ke motho ka batho*,³ meaning “I am because we are.” Indeed, considering dignity to be intricately linked to relationships, makes it plausible to render the African dictum, “I am because we are” as a statement of dignity. *Ubuntu* becomes an intrinsic component of dignity. The description of dignity as something that cannot be equated to an attribute peculiar to persons and their singularity, but rather as a relationship or a manifestation of human relations, offers an entry point to the notion of dignity from an African perspective. In this sense, dignity is manifested in the gestures of *ubuntu* through which we relate to others, considering them human just as human as we are – even if appearance suggests non-humanity.

The African idea of dignity evokes a well known epistemological aberration about Africans in the discourse of dignity. By choosing the Kantian idea of dignity also points to epistemological contradictions in the history of the encounter between different races and their different experiences in the application of the notion of dignity through ‘means and ends’. The colonial project in Africa was surely an end to some while Africans were a valuable means to that end. It should be remembered that Kant, as one of the icons of Western philosophy and the Enlightenment paradigm, and a renowned ethicist, did not perceive the black race on an equal basis with the white race. While his views on the idea of dignity are surely helpful and remain a pervasive argument for our grasp of this important notion, his exclusion of blacks or his low rating of the black race on the human scale he created, remains a disdainful contradiction that has plagued our understanding of dignity up to this day. He is not the only one to be charged with this error:

There was no field of Western academic endeavour since the seventeenth century, whether science, philosophy, art or theology, wherein the dehumanization of the African did not become the acid test of the superiority of both the Western European culture.

Examples in Western theology abound and are well known (Boesak, 2005, p. 9).

The view that Africa is ‘a non-historical territory’, ‘a virgin territory’ destined only to be invaded, to be a means to foreign categories of knowledge forms, has also been expressed by others such as Valentine Mudimbe (1988) in his book titled *African Gnosis*. One of the greatest Western scholars of the 20th century, Jürgen Habermas, can also be cited as another example of a philosopher with perverse views about Africans. Eze (2002, p. 50) argues that Habermas’s idea of Africa is a-historical and he says, “Habermas’s idea of Africa is conceptually hardly enlightening and is essentially politically regressive.”

However, Dussel places the notion of dignity squarely in the category of experience, as a starting point for its definition. He states that “‘Dignity’ is discovered through its opposite; it supposes its previous ‘denial’” (2003, p. 93). Dussel continues: “Dignity like the identity it involves is built up through process, through a movement of ‘dignification’” (2003, p. 93). In other words, the experience of ‘dignification’ presupposes an experience of the denial of dignity. It is this view that will shape our reflection on this topic. I shall

³ This is a Sesotho version. In abeNguni languages the famous expression is *umntu ngumntu ngabantu*.

apply African concepts to the notion of dignity to discover the meaning of dignity after the demise of apartheid in South Africa. These sentiments by Dussel have immense significance for our view of democracy as a process that could be viewed as one of ‘dignification’ among others, given the previous denial of dignity to black Africans in South Africa.

The struggle for liberation in the context of South Africa was a struggle for dignity against the original denial of black Africans in history. The original denial of blacks in the discourse of dignity implies that they were not seen as an end, but rather as a means to the desires, rationality and epistemological aspirations of their oppressors. For centuries blacks have not been seen as a self-conscious people free to make their own decisions and express their history and culture without any intimidation. Amilcar Cabral explains that “national liberation is necessarily an act of culture” (1980, p. 143). For this reason, our view of the idea of dignity from the perspective of African culture is a process of rediscovering black African people’s dignity.

Serithi/Isidima: An African Idea of Dignity

Serithi is a Sesotho word for ‘dignity’. In the same way, the word *isidima* is an isiXhosa word that also connotes the idea of dignity.⁴ There is another word in isiXhosa, *isithunzi*, an equivalent of the Sesotho word *serithi* meaning ‘shade’. Especially with regard to the connotation of ‘shade’, both these words i.e. *serithi* and *isithunzi* are central to the imaginative way we shall converse on the subject of dignity. The word *isithunzi* can mean ‘dignity’, but *isidima* is the one that is otherwise used to denote dignity as far as we know. There is a level of reservation in the use of the word *isithunzi* as it also has some negative connotations. For example, a derivative of *isithunzi* is *isithunzela*, meaning a human turned into a zombie by witchcraft. A similar idea is expressed by a Sesotho word, *sethotsela* – a human turned into a roaming zombie through witchcraft. It may appear ‘cumbersome’ to be always attempting to use African concepts and names in this discussion. However, it is necessary, as it also makes a point about the dignity that needs to be asserted and rediscovered by black Africans. Henceforth, I shall use these two words: *serithi* and *isidima* interchangeably, as I delve into a discussion of African dignity.

In both isiXhosa and Sesotho, a person who commands respect in the community is often described using the terms *serithi* or *isidima*. People will often say that someone has *isidima* or *serithi* to connote that he or she is a dignified person. Such a person will often command the warmth and respect of the community. This is a loveable person. These words suggest an aura of respectability, reputability and moral integrity, characteristics of someone who is described as one with *isidima*. These words can also be used to describe someone who dances with *isidima* or *serithi* i.e. with dignity. The English language uses the expression “we should treat others with dignity”, in the same way these words can be used in the vernacular. Systems can also be described in this fashion, namely as systems that erode or enhance *isidima* or *serithi*.

While these terms cannot be treated as equal to the terms *umntu* or *motho* i.e. a person, they can be used to qualify a relationship of dignity between persons. A person with *isidima* is described as one who is an *umntu* (isiXhosa), or *motho* (Sesotho). This point immediately

⁴ An explanation needs to be made that even though the meaning of the two words can be the same, there will always be a need for us to cautiously understand that there are some limitations in their translation, because their languages are not the same. At this point our main aim is to show that among Basotho and AmaXhosa, and thus among Africans, the idea of dignity has always been present.

threads the notion of *serithi/isidima* to the ethic of *ubuntu*. As has been stated, *ubuntu* signifies “an ethical concept that expresses a vision of what is valuable and worthwhile in life” (Chirongoma, Manda, & Myeni in De Gruchy, Koopman & Strijbos, 2008, p. 194). Chirongoma *et al.* explain further: “Since *ubuntu* means human, or humanness, then the central ethical value and starting point is dignity, that is, the dignity of persons because they are persons” (2008, p. 194).

Gabriel Setiloane (1976) and Mike Boon (1996) provide us with deeper insights into this question by putting the point at a higher level. As a ‘shade’, *isithunzi* embraces the whole of life, in other words, we can express the whole of life as a ‘shaded’ totality. When the words *serithi* or *isithunzi* are used to denote ancestors, the words gain a cosmological dimension. In relation to life itself, the word *isithunzi* is “seen as a vital force identifying an individual” (Boon 1996, p. 35). It has been suggested that *isithunzi* is that part of a person that actually becomes an *idlozi* – an ancestor – after the death of a person, and dubs *isithunzi* as an ‘immortal little soul’ that dwells in a person (Boon 1996). As the *isithunzi* is immortal, it is by doing evil or good things that we either denigrate or enhance the *isithunzi* of a person. Indeed, a person can be described as one who exudes bad *isithunzi*! This signifies one who tames *isithunzi* to cause terror, a gruesome evil that is feared most in African communities. We have already alluded to this by suggesting that an *isithunzela* is a person who is made into a zombie (a ‘little soul’), tamed for evil reasons. This simply implies a distortion of the radiance of the ‘shade’ offered by the ancestors for a shaded harmony of life and the vital force of life. A person who radiates a bad *isithunzi*, even though it is usually ‘whispered’, suggests some form of manipulation of *isithunzi* either to be feared or having undue power over others – it is almost ‘satanic’. Because of this, the word that is always preferred in isiXhosa to denote a positive sense of dignity is *isidima*.

However, the ideas we have grappled with so far are important to recapitulate. *Isithunzi* is a ‘shade’. *Isithunzi/serithi* is a vital life force and is immortal. Most importantly, *isithunzi* is specifically about the connectivity of life, indeed a conviviality of spheres and forms of existence shaded by a vital force that bonds the whole of life. Bujo (2003, p. 20) aptly suggests that: “African ethics treats the dignity of the human person as including the dignity of the entire creation, so that the cosmic dimension is one of its basic components.” It is these ideas we shall now employ in the context of democracy in South Africa.

***Serithi/Isidima* and Democracy in South Africa**

We have seen how *ubuntu* is connected to dignity. This word *ubuntu* has also been used in the formulation of the constitution of our country, the postamble of the Interim Constitution:

The adoption of this constitution lays the secure foundation for the people of South Africa to transcend the divisions and strife of the past, which generated gross violations of human rights, the transgression of humanitarian principles in violent conflicts and a legacy of hatred, fear, guilt and revenge. These can now be addressed on the basis that 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.

The antithesis of *ubuntu* is victimization, vengeance, and violence. However, it is also necessary to introduce certain cosmological ideas of dignity as shown in the paragraphs above. From an African perspective, our constitutional democracy must operate at a cosmological level first, ‘shaded’ by the ancestors. There must be a connection between power as a means and ‘the shades of the living departed.’ African dignity implies that our

constitutional democracy should be inextricably linked to the spiritual. This point should not be misconstrued to suggest that African culture should be given preeminence over other cultures in the development of our constitutional democracy. Africans note the cosmological link between *ubuntu* and dignity, and dignity and the ancestors. Power sharing is naked or ugly without the radiant guardianship of the ancestors,⁵ or of God or gods. Power is 'shaded' by either God or gods if democracy is to be a procedure of 'dignification'. The well known call for the reconstruction and development of the soul, once made by former president Nelson Mandela, requires us to connect democracy with the 'shades' of our ancestors – to create the procedures of democracy under the 'shade' (*serithi/isithunzi*) of the ancestors.

Ubuntu is the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community with justice and mutual caring. Ubuntu..., speaks to our connectedness, our common humanity and the responsibility to each other that flows from our deeply felt connection. Ubuntu is consciousness of our natural desire to affirm our fellow human beings and to work and act towards each other with the communal good in the forefront of our minds (Nussbaum 2003, p. 2).

Indeed, *ubuntu* is a social philosophy, a way of being and a code of ethics embedded in our culture which is incomplete without the 'shadedness' offered by the realm of the spiritual, the ancestors. The value of our democracy is based on *serithi/isidima*.

Due to the limitation of space, I will only make one major point, which is relevant for our times in South Africa and the world today. Fragmentation, as opposed to harmony and the interconnectedness of the whole of life, is a serious problem in our world today. It is a terrible sign of the hidden contest of the gods that underlies dominations, hegemonies, economic exclusions and miserable poverty in society today.⁶ The fragmentation of the spiritual from the procedural promises of democracy, disconfirms the dignity that is validated only by the interconnectedness and conviviality of life. We cannot hold this vision of democratic polity by creating *izithunzela* (zombies or 'manipulated souls'). Hence, the participation of citizens and consensual affirmations do not only affirm *isidima*, the unadulterated soul force of the people, but they also lend value to the procedures of democracy.

Our dignity suggests that *isithunzi/serithi*⁷ is a 'shade' of *memoria passionis*. Indeed, *isithunzi* or 'shade', to take my cue from Drea Fröchtling (2007, p. 2) connotes "an understanding of history *ex memoria passionis*," meaning that our construction of history comes out of the memories of suffering from physical, psychological and spiritual traumas. Memory, voice, cultural resources, religious resources and spiritual gifts of the historically vanquished are indispensable assets of public performance. Boesak (1977, p. 43) said this about dignity:

This inner reality is that other kind of power Paul Tillich called the 'courage to be.' The power or courage to be is the basic need to affirm ones own being. It arises from the feeling and certainty of one's own dignity. Dignity derived from Latin *dignus*, meaning

⁵ See the discussion of the African Renaissance and the spirituality of politics by Allan Boesak in his book, *The tenderness of conscience. African spirituality and the spirituality of politics*.

⁶ See the discourse of the Accra Confession about this matter.

⁷ It is important to explain that the metaphor is used to connote the ancestors. Ancestors are memories of a home and are always remembered to bring blessings to a home.

worthy, is a feeling of intrinsic worth, ‘an essential for every mentally healthy human being.’

This dignity inspired Mandela (1994, p. 82) who once said:

From very early on, I knew deep down that I would survive and that my dignity would be never lost. I always knew that some day I would feel the grass under my feet again and walk in the sunshine as a free man.

The metaphor of *isithunzi* as *memoria passionis* should be recognized as an historical ‘shade’ of dignity and its struggle when it was denied. The ‘shade’ of the struggle as *memoria passionis* signifies the ‘dangerous memory’ that defies amnesia – in other words forgetfulness in public life. However, the challenge today is to express the ‘shade’ of the *memoria passionis* of our dignity in the building and reconstruction of society. The memories of suffering cannot be romanticized more than they should evoke and instantiate a dignified life in public discourse. This ‘shade’ of our history simply reminds us about the historical fact that we must not ignore that Africa has been victimized and continues to exhibit “a life of horrifying meaninglessness, helplessness and lovelessness” (West, 1993, p. 23).

Serithi/Isidima: A Black Public Theology

Public theology reflects on power. If publicity⁸ is about power, the angst of *isithunzi* – the African vital life force in the 21st century – is a yearning of public expression, profession and confirmation of the inadequate if not absented African symbols and language in public life. The absence of the ‘world’ of African symbols in shaping public discourse renders any public theological discourse undignified. Paulo Freire’s words are appropriate to reiterate at this point:

I think that power and the struggle for power have to be rediscovered on the basis of the resistance which makes up the power of the people, the semiological, linguistic, emotional, political and cultural expressions which people use to resist the power of domination (Freire & Faundez, 1989, p. 64).

Today, the struggle for dignity, in the midst of poverty and hunger, is located in the ‘primary power’ of the poor. This is what seems to have been lost in the past fifteen years of democracy in South Africa. Furthermore, there are public issues that immediately require a discourse shaded by the vital force of *isidima*. Health, HIV/AIDS and unemployment are an ongoing agenda for black Africans, who are committed to the rediscovery of the dignity of their public discourse. The connectivity of life, a convivial ‘shade’ comprising God, faith, people, work, climate and land, all point to one thing, that *isidima* is relational to all of life.

One cannot conclude without pointing to the self-hate and anger that Africans have unleashed against themselves. West calls this a ‘psychotic’ disease of self-hate which is truly an expression of an inferiority complex engendered among Africans for many centuries. It is thus important to affirm the linguistic and the symbolic for life in public discourse.

Conclusion

This paper sought to reflect on the implications of a heuristic application of the notion of *serithi/isidima* for a deeper understanding of dignity. In essence, the argument is that the

⁸ The intention here is to convey an amalgam of public spheres in public life.

propagation of African symbols in public life has the potential to restore and rediscover dignity, leading to a democracy that flows from *isidima*. Such a vision of democracy is evanescent, if it is not complemented by the 'shades' of the spiritual.

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