CAN *UBUNTU* PHILOSOPHY INAUGURATE AND SUSTAIN MODERN DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA?

Felix O. Akamonye*

Abstract

Most articulations of African philosophy border on the presumption that like Europe, Africa has a common denominator worldview. This is often depicted as communitarianism or communalism. A recent popularization of the concept/philosophy of Ubuntu of Southern African origin signaled another attempt at finding a common denominator for Africans' expression of themselves as a worldview, an ethic and a philosophy. This sentiment is in some cases driven by the belief that the African predicament is a consequence of a western-values-driven-corrosion. This implies that, were Africa to retake its stride, she must go back to her roots. This is generally termed African renaissance and has given rise to African socio-political thoughts, in some cases also referred to as African Narratives of Return. In most cases these African narratives of return are unanimous in affirming what is now understood as African communitarianism or communalism as a common feature of Africans. The Ubuntu philosophy is chosen here merely because it is generally agreed to represent a well-articulated and very popular rendition of the so-called African communitarianism. Besides being a philosophy that originated in Africa, Ubuntu has since gone beyond the continent and dovetailed into many aspects of life. This essay is a critical examination of Ubuntu as a rendition of African communalism and/or communitarianism, and as an instance of a narrative of return, with the principal question of whether these narratives can inaugurate and sustain any attempt at African development. This essay's answer to the lead question is NO.

Keywords: Philosophy, *Ubuntu*, Africa, Development

1. Introduction

The second half of the last century buoyed by the attainment of independence of most African countries from their colonial masters had witnessed a form African renaissance. This renaissance had special implications in the collapse of the apartheid regime and the enthronement of black majority rule in South Africa. This renaissance consists in the search for ways to affirm an African identity on the one hand and human dignity on the other, often couched in nationalistic ideologies and philosophies. It was also a search for values that distinguish the African from other continents. The post-apartheid South Africa saw the resurgence of this renaissance in the form of Ubuntu, a word of southern African origin (principally South Africa and Zimbabwe), representing a rallying point of those who seek the African

renaissance in ways that are not limited to nation States, in an effort to mine from the repositories of African thought and culture, a worldview, an ethic and indeed a philosophy that is authentically African. Christopher Roederer and Darren Moellendorf, for instance, note that "*ubuntu* represents notions of universal human interdependence, solidarity and communalism which can be traced to small-scale communities in pre-colonial Africa, and which underlie virtually every indigenous African culture."[1] Consequently, the word Ubuntu has so diffused into everything that today one can speak of the commercialization of Ubuntu.[2] In both the public and private sectors, Ubuntu has become a vision, a mission and strategy.[3] Today there are institutions, computer software, as well as jobs and deals named after Ubuntu. This trend commands so much attention that Wim van Binsbergen has to write about "*Ubuntu* and the Globalisation of Southern African Thought and Society."[4]

While Ubuntu has sneaked into several facets of life especially in Southern Africa, there is neither a consensus on its philosophical delimitation, nor its general articulation. It has also not been spared abuse. In most of its applications, however, it is taken to generally represent the view that humans are interconnected and depend on each other for their humanity. Indeed, the 1997 South African Government White Paper on Social Welfare recognizes Ubuntu as

> The principle of caring for each other's well-being … and a spirit of mutual support … Each individual's humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through a recognition of the individual's humanity. Ubuntu means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being.[5]

It is on this umbrella view that rests the multidisciplinary attempts at articulating Ubuntu as a unique African contribution to the world. To this extent, Ubuntu could be described as "a set of institutionalized ideals which guide and direct patterns of life of Africans. It becomes a notion descriptive of a convergent set of desired goals which all, or at least most Africans entertain and towards which their activities are directed"[6]

---

[1]C.J.ROEDERER – D.MOELLENDORF, *Jurisprudence*, 441.

[2]On this see B.MATOLINO – W.KWINDINGWI, «The End of Ubuntu», 200-201.

[3]R.N.RICHARDSON, «Reflections on Reconciliation and Ubuntu», 82.

[4]W.VANBINSBERGEN, «Ubuntu and the Globalization of Southern African Thought and Society», 53-89.

[5] http://www.gov.za/documents/white-papers, assessed on 11/07/2015. See also D.J.LOUW, «Ubuntu and the Challenges of Multiculturalism in Post-Apartheid South Africa», 15.

[6]G.SOGOLO, *Foundations of African Philosophy*, 119.

Noteworthy for our discourse in the above description is that this view is now taken to transcend southern Africa to include the whole of Africa. Whether the above position is real or tenable or unanimous will of course forever remain in contention. Notwithstanding, while we will now try to briefly articulate what exactly is Ubuntu, our interest will be limited to Ubuntu as a 'convergent set of desired goals' that could be harnessed as a common denominator/tenet of most articulations of African thought and culture. It serves our purpose here to immediately note that Ubuntu is almost always presented as an African perspective in contrast to the dominant Western perspective. Our aim is simply to assess whether a modern world order is sustainable on the principles of such world view. While I question the view that there could be a common denominator world view for Africa diverse as it is, the crux of my argument departs from this question and indeed concedes the possibility in order to denote the impossibility of a sustainable world order based on such a view. My answer to my theme question is therefore a NO!

2. What is Ubuntu?

The Ubuntu 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 Democratice Republic of Congo; *gimuntu* in kiKongo and giKwese, spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola, respectively.[7]

The above serves to indicate that while Ubuntu is a southern African word, the concept it expresses also exists in other African cultures and languages.

Ubuntu is actually two words in one, consisting the prefix *ubu-* and the stem *-ntu.*[8] In reference to this conjoining, BuntuMfenyana notes that UBU refers to the abstract while NTU is an ancestor who got human society going and gave us our way of life as human beings.[9] Leaning on BuntuMfenyana's delimitation above, suffice it to suppose that UBU refers to the abstract while NTU refers to the concrete.

Generally, Ubuntu is taken to be a derivative of and related to *umuntu*, meaning a specific entity, a person, a human being. But, "Whereas the range of *ubu-* is the widest generality, *umu-* tends towards the more specific. Joined together with *–ntu, umu-* becomes *umuntu*. Ubuntu is therefore not a human being but a rather an

---

[7]N.M.Kamwangamalu, «Ubuntu in South Africa», 25.

[8]M.B.Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, 36; B.Mfenyana, «Ubuntu, Abantu, Abelungu», 18.

[9]B.Mfenyana, «Ubuntu, Abantu, Abelungu», 18.

aspect of a human being. Distinguished as such from the human person, Ubuntu could be said to be "a positive quality supposedly possessed by a person, …an internal state of being or the very essence of being human."[10] Significantly, Ubuntu is not just about human acts, "it is also about being, it is a disposition, and it concerns values that contribute to the well-being of others and of community… Ubuntu is a person's self-realisation and manifestation as a human being.[11] To this extent, Saule defined Ubuntu from the sociological perspective as the kind of behavior, "inculcated in the individual by society through established traditional institutions over a period of time."[12]

Ubuntu is generally translated as humaneness, which in the light of the above, is generally taken to be a way of life. Gade argued that this way of life between 1993 and 1995, came to be linked to a proverb common to many Southern African languages. He also stated that from 1995, it came to be defined simply by the proverb as *umuntungumuntunga bantu* (Xhosa)and *mothokemotho ka batho*(Sotho).[13] An approximated English rendition of this would be that "a person is a person through other persons."[14] Descriptively, this entails that "to be a human be-ing is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them."[15]Immediately evident from this is that the notion of Ubuntu encapsulates the African Worldview that gives meaning to the person in relation to the community. We would need to explore these for a better understanding of the underpinnings of the notion of Ubuntu.

2.1 Ubuntu as Worldview

All human groups in the world strive to give answers to their experience in the world and by so doing construct their interpretation of reality which is their worldview or *Weltanschauung*. People also construct worldviews based on their

---

[10]N.E.CHINKANDA, «Ubuntu in Terms of Socio-Welfare Field», 1 in M. MLULEKI – M. MOKGETHI, «Ubuntu and its Socio-moral Significance», 64.

[11]M.MLULEKI – M.MOKGETHI, «Ubuntu and Its Socio-Moral Significance», 65; In M.B.RAMOSE, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, 37 Ramose significantly emphasizes this be-ing dimension of Ubuntu. He notes that «Ubuntu then not only describes a condition of be-ing, insofar as it is indissolubly linked to umuntu but it is also the recognition of be-ing becoming and not, we wish to emphasise, be-ing and becoming.»

[12]N.SEULE, *Images in Some of the Literary Works of SEK Mqhayi*, 83; M.MLULEKI – M.MOKGETHI, «Ubuntu and Its Socio-Moral Significance», 65.

[13]C.B.N.GADE, «The Historical Development of the Written Discourses on Ubuntu», 313; M.B.RAMOSE, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, 37.

[14]M.B.RAMOSE, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, 37.

[15]M.B.RAMOSE, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, 37.

circumstances. Necessarily therefore, man has the practical need to acquire knowledge in order to understand the implicit, pre-ontological reasons for existence and experience and thereby predict features of the world to his advantage. This is man's necessity for a worldview.[16] Man's capacity for a worldview is a consequence of the rational nature and thus the ability to philosophize.[17] To this extent, we would choose to understand worldview here as a coherent collection of concepts allowing men "to construct a global image of the world, and in this way to understand as many elements of our experience as possible."[18] This is an affirmation of the view that "worldview crowns philosophy."[19]

Two areas of the African worldview (besides others), that I find very pertinent for understanding the notion of Ubuntu, is the African concept of the person and its relation to the community, often depicted as African communitarianism or communalism.[20]In the *locus classicus, "*Person and Community in African Traditional Thought"[21] Ifeanyi A. Menkiti argued that the African conception of person contrasts significantly with various other conceptions of the person found in Western thought. To this extent, most African thinkers and non-African authors on the African reality may agree with him, more or less. However, they differ with regard to

---

[16]C.VIDAL, «Wat is eenwereldbeeld? (What is a worldview?)», 7.

[17]On this see A.M.WOLTERS, «On the Idea of Worldview and Its Relation to Philosophy», 14-25.

[18]L.APOSTEL – J.VAN DERVEKEN, *Wereldbeelden*, 17.I am going into this relationship between worldview and philosophy in recognition of the age-old argument for the existence of African philosophy and in order to prepare the stage for a more subtle argument about communitarianism in African thought. I consider this relevant as a background for a discussion on African conception of the person and community. My approach will be to stick to my theme and allow the argument to remain in the background.

[19]A.M.WOLTERS, «On the Idea of Worldview and Its Relation to Philosophy», 14-25.

[20]See for instance: E. BONGMBA, «Communitarianism in African Thought» in New Dictionary of the History of Ideas. 2005. Retrieved July 16, 2015 from Encyclopedia.com:http://www.encyclopedia.com/ doc/1G2-3424300153.html; and «Persons, Individualism, and Communalism» in R.H.BELL, *Understanding African Philosophy*, 59-71.

[21]I.A.MENKITI, «Person and Community in African Traditional Thought» in R.A.WRIGHT, ed., *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, 171–182. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1984. This section is provoked by a fruitful reading of this article but also in relation to the debate between Menkiti and Kwame Gyekye. See also K. GYEKYE, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

the reach and details of this contrast.[22] A regular starting point in this regard is that the African departs from the western and Cartesian *cogito ego sum*. According to J.S. Mbiti, for the African, "What happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am." This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man."[23] Menkiti notes in this regard that "in the African view it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory."[24] To this extent, in his words, "whereas Western conceptions of man go for what might be described as a minimal definition of the person – whoever has soul, or rationality, or will, or memory, is seen as entitled to the description 'person' – the African view reaches instead for what might be described as a maximal definition of the person."[25]

The above suffices to note that in his view, for the African, it is not enough to define the human person as a rational animal. To be a real man and thus a human person, this organism must go through a long process of social and ritual transformation in which the community plays a vital role until it attains the state of excellence befitting of the ascription of personhood.[26] It is this that informs the various rites of initiation and passage found at various stages of growth for both men and women in various African societies. In Menkiti's view therefore, to some degree, within the African worldview, personhood is the sort of thing which has to

---

[22] To mention a few please see E.BONGMBA, «Communitarianism in African Thought» in New Dictionary of the History of Ideas. 2005. Retrieved July 16, 2015 from Encyclopedia.com: http:// www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3424300153.html; J.COMAROFF, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance*; E.CORIN, «Versuneréappropriation de la dimension individuelleenpsychologieafricaine», 135-156; G.DIETERLEN, *La Notion de personneen Afrique noire*; M.FORTES – J.GOODY, *Religion, Morality, and the Person*; M.JACKSON – I.KARP, ed., *Personhood and Agency*; A.JACOBSON-WIDDING, «The Shadow as an Expression of Individuality in Congolese Conceptions of Personhood»; P.RIESMAN, *The Person and the Life Cycle in African Social Life and Thought*, 71-138; K.WIREDU – K.GYEKYE, *Person and Community*. I will in this section outline the African conception of person as outlined by Menkiti, and using it as a basis advance a conception of the person in the African worldview.

[23]J.S.MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 141.

[24]I.A.MENKITI, «Person and Community in African Traditional Thought», 172.

[25]I.A.MENKITI, «Person and Community in African Traditional Thought», 173.

[26]I.A.MENKITI, «Person and Community in African Traditional Thought», 174-176.

be attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's stations.[27]

Akin to the conception of personhood in the African worldview is what constitutes a community. In contrast again with the Western view of community, Menkiti holds that "whereas the African view asserts an ontological independence to human society, and moves from society to individuals, the Western view moves instead from individuals to society."[28] So the African departs from the Western 'Methodological Individualism' and views the community as a whole with an organic relationship between the component individuals unlike the Western view of community as something constituted and as a non-organic bringing together of atomic individuals into a unit akin to an association than a community.[29] In this organic unit, every individual is attached and defined by the community in such a way that Sartre's existentialist idea of freedom of the individual does not fly with the African. It is also based on this that African societies emphasize duties in contrast to the Western emphasis on rights. This is because, according to Menkiti, in the African vision of the world, the individual is defined by the community and has duties that he can fulfill only as part of an organic whole, which is the community.

Menkiti considers that individual identity is part of a "thoroughly fused collective 'we'"[30], as opposed to the additive 'we'. As such, personhood in Africa is attained in the community context through a procedural process of integration and initiation from birth to death. This, in his view, would explain why neonates and the dead could be referred to with the impersonal pronoun 'it', for not having yet attained personhood through the process of initiation and integration, or for having been estranged from it.[31] Menkiti's summation in 'Person and Community in African Traditional Thought', at the first instance, is ambitious, impressive and novel. A deeper search, however, raises some striking fundamental anthropological questions. One may need to ask if the notion of the person and community articulated by Menkiti is common to all African peoples and in the case that it is, we need to ask if it is unique to the Africans. This underscores the thin line that exists between the human reality, and this reality as lived by any geographically,

---

[27]I.A.MENKITI, «Person and Community in African Traditional Thought», 176.

[28]I.A.MENKITI, «Person and Community in African Traditional Thought», 180.

[29]I.A.MENKITI, «Person and Community in African Traditional Thought», 180.

[30]I.A.MENKITI, «Person and Community in African Traditional Thought», 179.

[31]I.A.MENKITI, «Person and Community in African Traditional Thought», 173-174.

socially, culturally and politically bound group of humans. Indeed, one may also ask whether such conception of personhood is obtainable in any existing African cultural or political unit today? I doubt it does. Notwithstanding, in whichever direction the pendulum swings in this regard, there are fundamental anthropological questions to be confronted. However, some African as well as non-African thinkers have contended that Menkiti's views do not represent a unanimous view of Africans. I also share this view. Very outstanding among them is Kwame Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu. Both hold the view that the acquired personhood in the African context is not a state of being that is a consequence of a gradual socialization but a moral attribute that consists in attaining and practicing a particular moral life that contributes to the general well-being of the community.[32] I will briefly consider their contrasting views in order to set the stage and reveal the weakness and anthropological implications of Menkiti's assertions.

According to Gyekye, Menkiti's views are overstated and tended to be lopsided, thereby failing to give the complete picture of the African worldview in relation to personhood and the community. Gyekye who subscribes to being a moderate communitarian, among other criticisms of the 'Radical communitarianism' of Menkiti in *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience,* cites many Akan proverbs, among which is one which states that a clan is like a cluster of trees which, when seen from afar, appear huddled together, but which would seem to stand individually when closely approached. Menkiti's thesis in this regard would be likened to a view from afar, which will yield a different view on close observation. According to him, "Community existentially derives from the individual and the relationships that would exist between them."[33] This makes the reality of the community derivative and not primary in such a way that within the African social world, there exists enough space for the individual to actualize his/her potential and develop his/her personality with or without the community. This also includes the free choice of whether to continue to belong to the community or not. To this extent, Gyekye notes that when the African says that one is not human or in our circumstance here that one lacks Ubuntu, this merely refers to the "individual's consistently morally reprehensible conduct [since] … the pursuit or practice of moral virtue is intrinsic to the conception of a person held in African thought."[34]

---

[32]R.H.BELL, *Understanding African Philosophy*, 61.
[33]K.GYEKYE, *Tradition and Modernity*, 39.
[34]K.GYEKYE, *Tradition and Modernity*, 50.

In his view therefore, the ascription of personhood in the above context is an evaluative moral statement meant to portray human fulfillment or the quality that makes the person a better human being and does not lay claim to his/her humanity. On this note, Gyekye holds that despite the degree of socialization by the community, persons never lose the capacity for individual judgment, autonomy and even reevaluation of their membership of the community. As such "personhood can only be partly never fully, defined by one's membership in the cultural community. The most that can be said, then, is that a person is only partly constituted by the community."[35] It is for this reason that he refers to his views as "moderate communi-tarianism".

Kwasi Wiredu in comparison to Gyekye's moderate communitarianism proposes that the African worldview is based on a stronger form of communitarianism but one that has been virtually destroyed by industrialization and urbanization which promotes individualism in contrast to the African communalism. According to him,

> The integration of individuality into community in African traditional society is so thoroughgoing that, as is too rarely noted, the very concept of a person has normative layer of meaning. A person is not just an individual of human parentage, but also one evincing in his or her projects and achievements an adequate sense of social responsibility… One of the greatest problems facing us in Africa is how to reap the benefits of industrialization without incurring the more unlovable of its apparent fallouts, such as the ethic or austere individualism.[36]

The contrast between Menkiti's and Gyekye's and Wiredu's views about the African concept of the person and community in African thought serves to underscore the fact that Menkiti's views on these issues may have been overstretched. As an African from the same smallest possible cultural unit with Menkiti (African, from the Igbo Ethnic group of Southern Nigeria, who grew up in the same city, Onitsha, of Menkiti's origin), I find it hard to completely conceive the world Menkiti has structured: more so, when Menkiti argues that this worldview is representative of the African continent. Africa is a continent comprising of several nations with each nation made up of a myriad of closely knit tribes/ethnic groups, with diverse languages and religions, thereby making it impossible to have a consistent worldview traversing them. It is a fact of the

---

[35]K.GYEKYE, *Tradition and Modernity*, 54; K.GYEKYE, «Person and Community in African Thought», 327.

[36]K.WIREDU, *Cultural Universals and Particulars an African Perspective*, 71-72 Also collected in; A.G.MOSLEY, *African Philosophy: Selected Readings*, 400.

natural diversity of the human condition, that even within closely knit communities, the lives of the individuals within the community is sustained by contrasting worldviews. The least one can hope for would be a dominant worldview and never an exclusive one. Menkiti therefore is a victim of the bias of 'unanimism', which Hountondji defines as "the illusion that all men and women in such societies [African continent in our context] speak with one voice and share the same opinion about all fundamental issues."[37] This bias, as Richard Bell notes is a tag-along of the overgeneralizing tendencies of pioneer African philosophers as PlacideTempels and John S. Mbiti.[38]I hold the view that it remains an over ambitious and indeed an impossible task finding a consistent worldview that trasverses the whole of Africa. Part of these tendency I believe arises from viewing Africa like a continent like Europe. The Europe that exists today is a product of Christian civilization that incarnated through wars and evangelizations on earlier diverse cultures. Yet, communitarian thinking is a human attribute that exists in all cultures especially in the un-urbanized region. It is therefore not peculiar to the African continent.

2.2 Ubuntu Ethics

Christian B.N. Gade noted that one of the responses to the question 'What is *Ubuntu*?' – as reported in his research among South Africans of African descent – is that Ubuntu is a moral quality of a person, an ethic.[39] If as we have noted earlier, Ubuntu has to do with the idea that persons are interconnected, it can only mean that Ubuntu as an ethic is a consequence of African conception of the person in relation to the community as we have outlined. In this sense, we think that the community that furnishes an ethic must go beyond the existential community of human persons. Felix M. Murove, agreeing with BujoBénézet, succinctly captures this when he writes that,

> The African sense of community entails people being linked to one
> another in an essential way that unity is indissoluble.[40] This

---

[37]P.J.Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, xviii.

[38]R.H.Bell, *Understanding African Philosophy*, 59; In P.Tempels, *Bantu philosophy*, 35, Tempels notes that "The Bantu speak, act, live as if, for them beings were forces... Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force'. This unified force he calls an *élan vital.*Also in J.S.Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 141, Mbiti expresses the view that Africans do not think themselves as discreet individuals but as part of a community thus «we are therefore I am.»

[39]C.B.N.Gade, «What is Ubuntu?», 488.

[40]B.Bujo – B.McNeil, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, 34-35; See also, M.F.Murove, «Preserving our Collective Memory: An Ethical Inquiry into the Future of the Archival Tradition in South Africa».

community does not only include those who are still living but also those who have departed or exist in the realm of ancestorhood. An ethical act worthy of approval is, thus, one that preserves and incorporates the past into the present with the aim of providing the same memory for future generations. Past, present and future are therefore internally related in such a way as to express an existential symbiosis.[41]

Given the above, Ubuntu as an ethic is brought into being in the context of an *anamnesis,* and as such an ethic of *memoria*, bringing into one continuous relationship all the beings of the community and fusing together in the present, the past and future realities. It is based on this that in a view reminiscent of the Catholic doctrine of the *Communion of Saints*, many cultures in Africa have the cult of the ancestors or what Mbiti calls the *living dead.* Extended beyond humans, this relatedness of the whole of reality is manifested in totems and reverence for places (mountains, rivers etc.) and objects of nature believed to be enchanted. Totemism in this instance, "engendered the idea of solidarity between humanity and the natural environment in the sense that people's identity is something shared with the natural environment."[42]

In the light of the above, one can argue that for the African the ethical is inseparable from all the other spheres of existence.[43] According to Ali Mazrui,

African civilizations were characterized by the following attributes: no great distinction between the past, the present and the future; no great distinction between the kingdom of God, the animal kingdom and the human kingdom; …no sharp divide between the living and the dead… To die was to change your address.[44]

The Ubuntu ethic is therefore grounded in the relatedness of all beings in a network of life, exhibited as appropriating various elements of the universe out which it arises.[45] As such, the Ubuntu worldview favors a *symbiogenetic* account

---

[41]M.F.MUROVE, «Beyond the Savage Evidence Ethic: A Vindication of African Ethics», 27.

[42]M.F.MUROVE, «Beyond the Savage Evidence Ethic: A Vindication of African Ethics», 29.

[43]For more details on this see M.F.MUROVE, «Beyond the Savage Evidence Ethic: A Vindication of African Ethics», 28.

[44]A.A.MAZRUI, «From Sun Worship to Time Worship: Towards a Solar Theory of History», 175.

[45]On the idea of existence as an appropriation of various elements of the universe, see A.N.WHITEHEAD, *Process and Reality*, 65. I am bringing in Whitehead here oncemore to demonstrate that the communitarian values and the

of life, in such a way that from the Ubuntu perspective, behavioral patterns are to be defined in terms of the relatedness of all things. Leopold Senghor echoes this in saying that the African lives in symbiosis: he lives a common life in the other and dies to be reborn in the other.[46]

The idea of relatedness of all beings expressed in the ethics of Ubuntu is corroborated by some Western thinkers such as A.N. Whitehead. According to Whitehead, "The misconception which has haunted philosophic literature throughout the centuries is the notion of 'independent existence'. There is no such mode of existence; every entity is only to be understood in terms of the way it is interwoven with the rest of the Universe."[47] Whitehead therefore sees all reality as related. He further expounds:

> All relatedness has its foundation in the relatedness of actualities; and such relatedness is wholly concerned with the appropriation of the dead by the living – that is to say, with 'objective immortality' whereby what is divested of its own living immediacy becomes a real component in other living immediacies of becoming.[48]

2.3 The Philosophy of Ubuntu

We surmised before that 'worldview crowns philosophy' and entails a construction of a global image of the world for the purpose of understanding as many elements of our experience as possible. This furnishes us with the background to suggest that Ubuntu is the wellspring from which flows an ontology, epistemology, axiology and praxeology. For, if we accept Ubuntu to mean that "to be a human be-ing is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them"[49], it equally follows that Ubuntu not only describes a condition of being, but also in the words of Ramose, entails "the recognition of be-ing becoming."[50] Ramose intends to underline here that philosophy through Ubuntu implies that being and indeed truth is a whole that does not permit any form of fragmentation, while remaining multidimensional.[51]

---

ethics of relatedness evident in *ubuntu* is a human value and not just an African value.

[46]L.S.SENGHOR, *On African Socialism*.

[47]A.N.WHITEHEAD, *Essays in Science and Philosophy*, 64.

[48]A.N.WHITEHEAD, *Process and Reality*, ix; See also C.HARTSHORNE – C.PEDEN, *Whitehead's View of Reality*, 34; J.B.COBB – D.R.GRIFFIN, *Process Theology*, 27-28.

[49]M.B.RAMOSE, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, 37.

[50]M.B.RAMOSE, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, 37.

[51]D.BOHM, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, 1-33.

Our foregoing discussion may raise the question as to what is really novel about the Ubuntu worldview or philosophy? Are there not some strands of philosophy in the Western tradition which holds about the same or similar views? What makes the Ubuntu worldview characteristically African? And indeed, what is the difference between Ubuntu and other similar but unsuccessful articulations of African Socio-political ideas and thoughts? To adequately answer these questions, we need to summarily consider African socio-political thoughts and ideas and so explain the difference Ubuntu makes in the context of other strands of visionary thought in Africa and elsewhere in the world.

3. Ubuntu and Other trends in African Socio-Political Thought

> Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm – every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there – you who never was there – if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over – over and done with – it's going to always be there waiting for you.[52]

Toni Morrison's metaphor of fleeting presence and nostalgia of what once was and never ceases to be, speaks volumes to the African predicament with respect to the cross cultural fertilization of values between Africa and the rest of the world, and the consequences of this cross cultural fertilization on Africa and Africans. This once more brings to focus a constant tag-along of any philosophical discussion of the African reality is the perspective of African Renaissance. This perspective arises from the understanding that given the historical realities and effects of the Arab and trans-Atlantic slave trades, colonialism, declarations of independence of African States, and the accusations of neo-colonialism, the African continent has a peculiar history. This realization provides the basis for the movement for a return to the original African values, prior to the exposure of these values to Western values. This sentiment is driven by the belief that the African predicament is a consequence of a western-values-driven-corrosion. This implies that, were Africa to retake its stride, she must go back to her roots. This is generally termed African renaissance and has given rise to African socio-political thoughts, in some cases also referred to as African Narratives of Return.

The African renaissance received a boost with the granting of independence to most African States in the 1960s, as an end point in the process of transformation

---

[52]T.MORRISON, *Beloved*, 35-36.

in the way the world is organized and governed since the end of the Second World War. This came after many years of agitation by African nationalists. As African States gained independence from their colonialists, their emergent leaders who often were part of the struggle for independence in the post-second world war era leading to the 1960s, sort to affirm an African identity based on discoverable characteristics peculiar to the African. However, despite this desire, these leaders were immediately challenged with the need for National Unity, rapid economic development, and political stability. Given that the emergent independent African States were constituted of heterogeneous and multi-cultural societies – consequent on the circumstances of Africa's colonization and partitioning managed without regard to neither the interests nor the cultural, historical and natural divisions of the constituent peoples – the new African leaders were immediately saddled with the need to engender national unity. This is coupled with the attendant exigency for rapid economic development and political stability. Naturally, the leaders sought for a rallying point in the form of nationalistic ideologies or philosophies that could engender this.

Consequently, the new African leaders proposed ideologies for national unity, economic development and political stability. Among these were Julius Nyerere's *Ujamaa* (1968), Kwame Nkrumah's *Consciencism* (1964), Léopold Sédar Senghor's *Négritude* (1964), Kenneth Kaunda's *African Humanism* (1966), Mobutu Sese Seko's *Mobutuism* (1980) and Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya (1986). Others like Obafemi Awolowo and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, and Ahmed Sékou Touré of Guinea despite supporting national ideologies did not articulate them under one umbrella idea. With the circumstances of the time – prominent among which was the fact that the new independent States were mostly ex-colonies of the Western Bloc, coupled with the raging Cold War between the United States/the Western Bloc on one side and USSR/the Eastern Bloc on the other – there was a natural pull towards socialism in the new African nations. This could be because, there was a complete identification of colonialism with capitalism, and a coupling of political system with economic system.

Paradoxically, the reality of the African concept of the person and community that we have discussed was employed as a basis for the African Socialism. As such, despite the fact that most of the African newly independent nations were former colonies of France and Britain in the Western Bloc, the new African nations favored socialism. This gave rise to nationalistic philosophies spiced with one form of socialism or the other and generally termed African Socialism and often used interchangeably with Pan-Africanism. Significantly, it is noteworthy that the preference for socialism against capitalism arose from certain presuppositions

about the nature of capitalism. For most of the newly independent States, development was synonymous with socialism.[53] For instance, Nkrumah in his autobiography considered capitalism too complicated a system for newly independent nations, a circumstance from which he derived the need for a socialist society at least inasmuch as "Capitalism would be a betrayal of the personality and conscience of Africa."[54] Others such as David Dacko of the Central African Republic,[55] Mamadou Dia,[56] Léopold Sédar Senghor,[57] etc., expressed similar or allied views.[58]

Notwithstanding, the proponents of African Socialism insisted that it is neither the same with classical socialism nor is it the opposite of capitalism, but rather an Afrocentric economic model for the distribution of economic resources. To this extent, African Socialism is generally taken to be based on the African extended family system. In the traditional African societies, economic resources and social welfare were distributed and sustained through the extended family system. African socialism proposes the adoption of a model similar to this extended family system. According to G.N. Uzoigwe, "The *extended family* … is not only the beginning of the political community but also the foundation of society. The African State is an organism growing out of the family; … Notions of nationalism and patriotism are learned within the family and extended to the wide society… The State, then, is the extended family writ large."[59] The implication of the above would be that the State is understood as a bigger family. Indeed, writing on African socialism Brockway notes:

> The principle of the State as a father, which is the basis of socialism, is what we have here in our clans or tribes which are in fact extended families. In our society, the collective wealth of the extended family is used for the welfare of the family as a whole. The extended families take on the functions of social insurance, and if a member of the family falls into debt, all the others help him to pay it; if he is ill, they look after him; if there is a bright boy in the family whom the immediate parents cannot afford to educate, the others help in educating him. Property, especially land, often belongs to the whole extended family. There are abuses in the

---

[53]M.JITENDRA, «Varieties of African Socialism», 221.

[54]K.NKRUMAH, *The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah*, 7.

[55]M.JITENDRA, «Varieties of African Socialism», 221.

[56]M.DIA, *The African Nations and World Solidarity*, 35-36.

[57]L.S.SENGHOR, *On African Socialism*, 46.

[58]M.JITENDRA, «Varieties of African Socialism», 221-222.

[59]G.N.UZOIGWE, «The Warrior and the State in Pre-colonial Africa», 35.

extended family system, but its basic pattern, when enlarged to embrace the State, is virtually what is meant by socialism.[60]

Noteworthy is also the fact that not all African States subscribed to a form of African Socialism. Ivory Coast for instance officially identified herself as State Capitalism, and Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, despite having Pan-African ideas expressed and sustained by some of the fathers of the nation as Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo did not subscribe officially to any form of African socialism. Also, there was no unanimous agreement among her proponents as regards its delimitations and structures for its application. For instance, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana affirmed that "there is only one Socialism – scientific Socialism"[61] and that "our Socialist ideology … is the application of the principles of scientific Socialism to our African milieu"[62]. From another extreme, The Kenya Government Whitepaper of 1965 on African Socialism records that "In the phrase 'African Socialism', the word African is not introduced to describe a continent to which a foreign ideology is to be transplanted. It is meant to convey the African roots of a system that is itself African in characteristics."[63]And yet another variation is reflected in the fact that President Sékou Touré of Guinea described the then currents in Africa as "Socialism for the sake of Socialism."[64]

In a general survey of African socialism with detailed studies of Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Senegal, and Tanganyika (later merged with Zanzibar in 1967 to become Tanzania), Friedland and Rosberg, note that the main architects of African Socialism are Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Léopold Senghor of Senegal, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Sékou Touré of Guinea.[65]It is no longer news that all the nationalistic ideologies of the post-independence Africa failed woefully to better the lot of Africans. The Ubuntu philosophy which is popularized much later share many of the characteristics of these ideologies. It therefore becomes pertinent to ask what difference does the Ubuntu philosophy make?

---

[60]F.BROCKWAY, *African Socialism*, 25-26.

[61]K. NKRUMAH, *Ghanaian Times,* Accra 20 December 1965, cited in M.JITENDRA, «Varieties of African Socialism», 220.

[62] K. Nkrumah, *The Worker*, Accra 1 (1) May 1965, 31 cited in M.JITENDRA, «Varieties of African Socialism», 220.

[63]REPUBLIC OF KENYA, *African Socialism and Its Application to Planning in Kenya*, 2.

[64]A.S.TOURÉ, *Guinean Revolution and Social Progress*, 362.

[65]W.H.FRIEDLAND – C.G.ROSBERG, *African Socialism*, 3.

4. Can Ubuntu Inaugurate and Sustain a Modern African Development?

The common characteristics of the African socio-political thoughts that we have considered are that: a. They came to be, in the circumstances of the independence of African nations especially in the decade from 1956 to 1966. b. They were generally proposed by the African elite who have studied in the West and emerged as leaders in the post-independent African nations. c. They generally propose a form of African renaissance and/or a return to some core African value/s as a means for the affirmation of the identity and humanity of the African, consequent on the colonial experience. d. While they possessed some common characteristics (for instance, they all professed some form of African communalism), they were mostly nationalistic ideologies (with the exception of *Négritude* which was not limited to a nation but all the same spoke of the black race as if it were a nation). e. They presupposed, to a large extent, a monolithic African worldview both in ideology and lived experience, and by considering their interpretation as the authentic interpretation of the African reality and experience, shut out other equally viable and enriching interpretations. These common characteristics have also served as major points of weakness and thus criticisms of the socio-political thoughts.

These African socio-political thoughts are also generally referred to as African Narratives of Return. Christian B.N. Gade had also noted some basic characteristics of such narratives of return. According to him, such authors seem to promote a tripartite dialectic of history. The first stage being the pre-colonial phase perceived as the golden age of Africa and characterized by harmony. The second phase is characterized by the intrusion of the colonizers that robbed Africans of their resources, dignity and culture. The third and present phase is the phase of recovery, "where Africans, after having gained sufficient political power, attempt to restore their dignity and culture by returning to their traditional, humanist, or social values."[66] Gade concluded that Ubuntu displays some of the characteristics of the earlier post-colonial narratives of return.[67] Motolino and Kwindingwi[68], while quoting Gade, went beyond him to completely identify Ubuntu as a narrative of return. Motolino and Kwindingwiidentified Ubuntu as a narrative of return. The implications of this complete identification of Ubuntu as a narrative of return is diverse. Salient in the background is the truth that if their argument is correct, it

---

[66]C.B.N.Gade, «The Historical Development of the Written Discourses on Ubuntu», 304-305.

[67]C.B.N.Gade, «The Historical Development of the Written Discourses on Ubuntu», 306.

[68]B.Matolino – W.Kwindingwi, «The End of Ubuntu», 197-205.

follows that Ubuntu, like other narratives of return, is faulty by default and as such unattainable, a position reminiscent of Sartre's 'Black Orpheus'. My position though is that while it shares some characteristics with the narratives of return, Ubuntudiffers from them fundamentally in some other characteristics and therefore cannot be completely identified with them. Before I go on to establish this position, I will briefly consider the positions of those that dismiss Ubuntu as a narrative of return, as well as on other accounts.

For instance: Van Binsbergen argues that Ubuntu denies humanity to people of non-African origin;[69] Christopher Marx argues that Ubuntu gives rise to a strategy of exclusion while at the same time its emphasis on community values gives rise to an attitude of conformity;[70] R.N. Richardson on the other hand argues that Ubuntu in the post-Apartheid South Africa is used in a universalized and decontextualized sense leaving it open to manipulation.[71]Motolino and Kwindingwi go a step further to question the authenticity of Ubuntu as a representation of African reality: they noted that apart from "the questions of interpretation of whether Ubuntu in itself represents an authentic mode of Afrocentricity, another question that arises has to do with whether this form of Afrocentricity or any other form for that nature is desirable or appropriate."[72] Motolino and Kwindingwi's criticisms come on the heels of the fact that an affirmation of Ubuntu as a true expression of the African reality reduces African reality to a monolithic view. Such a reduction would be a negation of the capacity of Africans to engage in free intellectual activities. This is because in every society, there always exist contrasting worldviews as an expression of man's freedom for intellectual enterprise. Again, even if there existed such an overarching expression of African reality, its context (as even the narratives of return attest) were the pristine state of Africa prior to slavery and colonization, which has irretrievably given way to the impacts of colonization, urbanization, globalization and other factors, in the shaping and development of the African mode of being.[73] Further still, an acceptance of Ubuntu as an authentic African mode of being, raises the question as to whether Africans or any other specific group of people on earth are metaphysically and particularly disposed to some moral qualities such as being social, communal, altruistic etc., or are these qualities born of specific contexts and driven by specific aims. This seeks to

---

[69]W.vanBinsbergen, «Ubuntu and the Globalization of Southern African Thought and Society», 53-89.

[70]C.Marx, «Ubu and Ubuntu», 49-69.

[71]R.N.Richardson, «Reflections on Reconciliation and Ubuntu», 65-83.

[72]B.Matolino – W.Kwindingwi, «The End of Ubuntu», 202.

[73]B.Matolino – W.Kwindingwi, «The End of Ubuntu», 203.

determine what has precedence over the other: the metaphysical or the ethical? Specifically, "Are Africans adherents of ubuntu because there is something African in them that orients them towards ubuntu? Or are they Africans because they are adherents of ubuntu?"[74] Whichever preference one subscribes to in the above context is problematic. It can be immediately gleaned that Africans could not have been metaphysically predisposed to the Ubuntu mode of being as that will profile them and preclude them from the expression of any other mode of being. The ethical precedence would also be unattainable, since the Africans do not have a monopoly of the ethical qualities inherent in the Ubuntu mode of being. One need not go far to discover that there are lots of similarities between articulations of Ubuntu and the views of some Western thinkers as Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer, collectively referred to as communitarians, more by critics than by themselves.[75]

Ubuntu is also most problematic, as Motolino and Kwindingwi affirm, in "its failure to strike a coherent balance between its central claims of authenticity as a lived-out mode of being and what the circumstances of Africans are as moral beings living in the here and now."[76] This is to say that Ubuntu hardly addresses the increasingly globalized and sophisticated outlook of modern society. One could ask, for instance, what are the exact political and economic commitments of Ubuntu? Failure to live up to these will reduce Ubuntu to a mantra that will be wanting in detail. Based on this, Motolino and Kwindingwi concluded that Ubuntu "is obsolete by virtue of the fact that the context in which its values could be recognised is now extinct."[77] One constant challenge to any proposition of African values or philosophy is the disadvantage of starting off with worn out tools. This consists in the fact that most of African thoughts and cultural elements and variations were not documented in written forms until recent times and thus were transmitted mostly through oral tradition. Also, most political leaders in Africa

---

[74]B.MATOLINO – W.KWINDINGWI, «The End of Ubuntu», 204.

[75] While these thinkers are referred to as communitarians, they mostly see themselves differently. Their writings were mostly directed against the inherent universalism of the liberal theory of John Rawls. Both Taylor and Walzer identify themselves as liberals. MacIntyre says that he has never been a communitarian, and Sandel identifies himself as a republican rather than communitarian. See for instance, A.C.MACINTYRE, *After Virtue*; A.C.MACINTYRE, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*;M.J.SANDEL, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*; M.J.SANDEL, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*; C.TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self*; M.WALZER, *Spheres of Justice*; M.WALZER, *Thick and Thin*.

[76]B.MATOLINO – W.KWINDINGWI, «The End of Ubuntu», 204.

[77]B.MATOLINO – W.KWINDINGWI, «The End of Ubuntu», 203.

have betrayed the philosophical and humanitarian principles on which African ethos were claimed to have been based. As such, Africa has become a continent almost synonymous with political failures. Yet again, in the wake of the outbreaks of such diseases as HIV/AIDS and Ebola, as well as the immigration crisis from Africa to the West, most information that filter to the West in the media are dressed in these garbs. It will therefore, for a long time, be a challenge to stand on these ruins to propose a new interpretation with the hope of making a difference. It is against this background that Ubuntu is often characterized along with the so-called earlier African narratives of return and dismissed along with them.

It must however be noted that a careful look at Ubuntu makes it stand out from earlier articulations of African thought – socio-political or otherwise. One will immediately notice that all the narratives of return earlier considered were proposed and spearheaded by one or more nationalist leaders. As such, besides having a person as its arrowhead, it was also garbed in some nationalistic ideologies and therefore was bound within the confines of particular nation States. This is besides the fact that they were always a mix of some African values or identity affirmation with one or more strands of an existing Western philosophy. Ubuntu stands out on this count by not being a proposal or an invention of any thinker nor is it the nationalistic ideology of any one country. While an extant of it linked to the Xhosa proverb is traceable to Southern Africa, the notion is not unique to Southern Africans. It could therefore be said to be a tradition or a system of thought that cannot be grouped together with African narratives of return and consequently cannot be wished away along with other narratives of return. I also argue that while the word Ubuntuand its proverbial articulation may be traceable to Southern Africa, its content could be found in all human societies and therefore may not be dismissed as an African narrative of return.

Another way of looking at the issue at stake here could be from the point of view of the computer software named after Ubuntu, the *Ubuntu Linux*. In contrast to copyrighted software developed by private companies and sold for gain, the *Ubuntu Linux* is based on the *Open Source Initiative (OSI),* an umbrella for software, developed and distributed free by the joint effort of a community of developers. Users are also privy to and may adapt the internal functionings of the software, as well as redistribute the software. The slogan that 'together we succeed better' could summarize the philosophy. As an operating system software, the *Ubuntu Linux* has been making some ingrowth into the Software Development Universe along with the otherwise closed systems as Microsoft Windows Operating System and Apple Macintosh Operating System. The principal attraction to it has been its ability to pool together the efforts of all willing

developers in addition to its non-restrictive characteristic. It is probably named Ubuntu because of its demonstration of the interconnectedness of all persons irrespective of race, location, gender, creed, etc. This way of software development also accounts for the recent successes of such other software developments as the *Mozilla Firefox* and the *Zotero* bibliography management software. Yet one must immediately note that it is neither mozillafirefox, nor Zotero nor even Ubuntu Linux that is trending well in the New York stock exchange, it is rather such companies as *Microsoft Windows OS* with *Windows Explorer* and the *Mac OS* with *Safari* that are carrying the day. As I write this paper I just realized the current update of the Mac OS does no longer support the Zotero software. Besides the example of the *Ubuntu Linux*, the idea of the interconnectedness of all persons and indeed the whole universe has also been gaining some vindication from other fields of study. Besides Alfred Noth Whitehead that we have earlier cited, other fields of study also echo this idea of the interconnectedness of all existence. Within quantum physics David Bohn, DonahZohah and Fritjof Capra all converge on the point that sub-atomic particles are meaningless except in their relation to one another and that the universe is a dynamic inseparable totality in which the observer is also essentially related.[78] Also with respect to evolution, microbiologists as well as ecological biologists have emphasized the primacy of the relation of all living things in themselves and their relation to their environment as the basis for evolution. Viewed as such, the appearance of life in their view is best described as a form of convergence termed *symbiogenesis*.[79]

All the above, in my opinion, speaks to the notion of Ubuntu, which in noting that a person is a person through other persons, affirms the interconnection of all existence in a sort of network of life. So we can surmise that the Ubuntu notion merely mines from the African culture, an existent and common feature of the universe, which in the context of the present day globalized world, gains a lot of currency as a possible tool for providing a counter current to modern day atomization and individualism. It is also very pertinent to point out that this interpretation of Ubuntu as a universal experience of all humans opens it up to not just being a unique African experience but an African interpretation of a universal human experience. Having noted other areas that echo the spirit of Ubuntu, it must also be noted that the Ubuntu proposal I articulated above in the context of the universal human experience is not without precedents in philosophy. To mention a

---

[78]D.BOHM, «Postmodern Science and a Postmodern World», 64; D.ZOHAR, *The Quantum Self*, 80-114; F.CAPRA, *The Tao of Physics*, 78.

[79]J.LOVELOCK, *The Ages of Gaia*, 99; L.MARGULIS – D.SAGAN, *Microcosmos*, 127-236.

few, Bernard Lonergan's articulation of the *cosmopolis*[80] and Hannah Arendt's 'public realm'[81], both propose a world community in which human freedom is a principal driving force. They were both concerned with "the decline of society and the dangers of solipsism, materialism and totalitarianism,"[82] and sort for a world community built on individual freedom and freed from biases and prejudices for the discovery and advancement of true knowledge and meaning. The proposals of Bernard Lonergan and Hannah Arendt share some similarities with the philosophy of Ubuntu. Also the thoughts of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas as they pertain to openness to the other could also be read along these lines.

5. Conclusion

Given that modern African nations are organized as nation states ruled by the modern instruments for distributive justice; for the maintenance of law and order for the enhancement of development in the form of retributive justice, one question that arises at this stage is: Does development mean something different for the African? How does the Ubuntu notion relate to modern day development especially in the context of states established on justice as retribution? Indeed, what relevance has Ubuntu in the context of the globalized world of today? Evidently, the Ubuntu notion cannot be completely incorporated into a system of retributive justice. One would therefore be forced to answer that indeed Ubuntu would entail a different interpretation of the present world order. Yet the present world order is ruled by capitalism. If Africans therefore subscribe to communalism, how can they survive in the present world order?

One way to structure a world order governed by the Ubuntu worldview is to start with a parable:

> In a small seashore hamlet in Africa, there was the law that recommends capital punishment for anyone found guilty of murder. This law existed side by side with the communitarian worldview of familyhood in which each member of the community constitutes the larger family that is the village community. However, should one be accused of murder, s/he is entitled to a fair and public hearing. The community had the tradition of judging the accused in the village square, where the community led by the elders examines the accusers, with witnesses. If after the public hearing the accused were found guilty, s/he would be condemned to capital punishment to be carried out by the community. On the day of execution, the

---

[80]B.LONERGAN, *The Lonergan Reader*, 148-151.

[81]H.ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, 50-58.

[82]H.L.VENABLE, «Freedom in World Community».

accused is bound hand and foot and placed in a small boat that cannot withstand the tempest of the sea. The boat would be set to sea, tied to a cord which will be handed over to the family of the murdered person for them to release the cord and thereby cutting all connection between the guilty and the community and allowing him/her to perish in the sea. The community would also give them the option of drawing the little boat back to shore and forgiving the guilty and compelling him not do the same again. In the case that they took the option of forgiveness, the culprit will undergo a process of reintegration into the village community. Tradition had it that while a couple of people had been judged guilty of murder, in all cases, the family of the bereaved always drew the boat back to shore in the belief that even the gravity of murder does not diminish the humanity that the community shared.[83]

The above parable serves only to structure a hypothetical world ruled by communalism and which will require in the words of Wittgenstein and echoed by Elizabeth Wolgast a different "grammar of justice"[84], and therefore a different modality for the inauguration and sustenance of development. In our time, this different grammar of justice is what seems to have played out in the South African *Truth And Reconciliation Commission (*TRC), which conducted public hearings and confessions for both the victims and perpetrators of the atrocities of the apartheid era, with the view of healing through truth telling and amnesty. South Africa today seems to still hold onto a qualified peace after the passage from the apartheid and white minority rule to democracy and black majority rule. Reflecting on the commission and how South Africa was able to achieve the miracle of the avoidance of violence in the process of transition, many theorists as Alex Boraine[85] and public figures like Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandelacredit it to Ubuntu. Desmond Tutu in particular notes the inherent order in the Ubuntu philosophy is *restorative justice*[86] as opposed to retributive justice.

---

[83] I did not invent this parable. I remember hearing it recounted in a film. However, like all parables, the wordings and settings here are mine. My contribution is its rendition here in the context of Ubuntu.

[84]E.H.WOLGAST, *The Grammar of Justice,* Ithaca N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1987. Wolgast argues that the language of rights does not make sense of what we judge to be important moral goods and thereby attempts to demonstrate the incoherence of reparative metaphors on which retributive justice is grounded.

[85]A.BORAINE, *A Country Unmasked*, 423 & 425.

[86] As quoted in M.MINOW, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, 81. See also D.TUTU, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 51 See also; DE LANGE JOHNNY, «The Historical Context, Legal Origins and Philosophical Foundation of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission», 24; A.BORAINE, *A Country Unmasked*, 426.

The above however stands in need of explication. Indeed, the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* had been grossly criticized for not seeking justice for the victims of apartheid, bringing into focus what exactly is restorative justice and what qualifies it as justice? In the world we had structured in the parable above and in the context of the South African *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, can one claim that justice had been done?

The import of restorative justice is that justice is attained within the context of a larger moral discourse that departs from the mainline paradigm to the consideration of other moral ethos like self-sacrifice, the welfare of others, reconciliation, restoration, forgiveness, mercy etc., which go beyond the ordinary moral duties required of a person. These acts are generally referred to as supererogatory acts and are considered intrinsic to a communitarian ethic.[87] This however brings into focus whether these moral acts would further the course of justice and development of society especially since they entail some incalculable risks. While people like John Rawls would hold that though these acts remain good, they cannot form part of the moral obligation of persons in society, others like Simon Weil, Kwame Gyekye, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and to some degree Wole Soyinka, etc., insist that acting for the benefit of all relates in part to the development of moral character tied to communitarian-based thinking, with the dividing line being emphasis on individual justice on the one hand and on community well-being on the other hand.

Restorative justice has been criticized by the same token from which it derives its relevance. Just like Paul Ricoeur notes that we must remember because remembering is a moral duty, Wole Soyinka criticizes the idea of restorative justice as put forward by the South African *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. In *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness,* he asks "Once repression stops, is reconciliation between oppressor and victim possible? In the face of centuries long devastations wrought on the African continent and her Diaspora by slavery, colonialism, Apartheid, and the manifold faces of racism, what form of recompense could possibly be adequate?"[88] He argues that the "muse of forgiveness" often sheds "the burden of memory" too quickly. His view is that truth alone is never enough to guarantee reconciliation. Justice requires mitigation and reparation before reconciliation. According to him, reparation should precede

---

[87]R.H.BELL, *Understanding African Philosophy*, 85.
[88]W.SOYINKA, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*, The citation is a summary of the book as contained in the book jacket.

reconciliation in "a healing millennial trilogy: Truth, Reparations, and Reconciliation."[89] While I definitely agree that justice should be expanded beyond the confines of retributive justice especially in our current context of the globalized world wrought with violence, I also believe that reparation and/or restitution, should constitute part of any adequate theory of justice, otherwise justice will be synonymous with conceding to the enemy. To this extent the criticism of Wole Soyinka to restorative justice as structured into the South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee is very relevant. Indeed, truth alone does not engender justice. There is also the need for reparations.

I find some resonance with my discussions so far in *The Public and the Private Realm* in Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition.*[90] I use this distinction here only to underlie that different laws apply at the two different realms. While the idea of Ubuntu and the inherent idea of justice as restorative is a very admirable recognition of the common humanity that all humans regardless of race, color and location share, I can submit that no modern society can be sustained based on just that. Such an order can only operate at the private realm and must give way to another order at the public realm. A graphic representation of this is that today while South Africa glory on the use of the idea of Ubuntu in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the same people that were guilty of Apartheid are in charge of the economy of the country and have found subtle ways to continue their acts. Nigeria bankrolled the fight against apartheid. Today is over but Nigerians are told to leave South Africa because some Nigerians deal on drugs in that Country. Again Nigeria contributed eighty percent of the resources (liquid capital, manpower and otherwise) for ECOMOG to execute the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia yet unlike countries that execute such wars in history Nigeria has nothing to show for it except accusations from these countries of looting by Nigerian soldiers. This was because these were done on the presumption of benevolence.

Therefore

1. Ubuntu and indeed any form of communalism has the attendant risk of burying oneself in the walled segregation of the particularism or specie that is Africa, instead of the unencumbered universal or genus that is the world. This risk implies that emphasizing the differences Africans have in comparison with other continents could translate to auto-destruction as once enunciated by Jean-Paul Sartre.[91] This summarily implies that were one to succeed in arguing that the Africans are different from the rest of the world, the same

---

[89] W.SOYINKA, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*, 92.
[90] See H.ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, 22-78
[91] J.-P.SARTRE, *Black Orpheus*, 25.

argument would hold true for any form of profiling with regard to the continent, an attempt Sartre typifies as anti-racist racism.[92] An awareness of this risk should entail a shift in perspective to affirming that Africans like the rest of humanity in attempting to understand reality, do so through a world view that is community oriented but which at the same time is not traceable to only Africans. This is because, the communitarian worldview being a human value, also exists to varying degrees in other human societies.

> We must affirm that Africa has a peculiar history given the historical realities and effects of the Arab and trans-Atlantic slave trades, colonialism, declarations of independence of African States, and the accusations of neo-colonialism etc.,even if there were to exist such a community in Africa that completely identified with African communalism, its context (as even the narratives of return attest) were the pristine state of Africa prior to slavery and colonization, which has irretrievably given way to the impacts of colonization, urbanization, globalization and other factors, in the shaping and development of the African mode of being.[93]Therefore one of the greatest problems facing us in Africa is how to reap the benefits of industrialization without incurring the more unlovable of its apparent fallouts, such as the ethic or austere individualism.[94]

2. Related to the above is that that an affirmation of Ubuntu as a true expression of the African reality reduces African reality to a monolithic view. Such a reduction would be a negation of the capacity of Africans to engage in free intellectual activities. This is because in every society, there always exist contrasting worldviews as an expression of man's freedom for intellectual enterprise.

3. Further still, an acceptance of Ubuntu as an authentic African mode of being, raises the question as to whether Africans or any other specific group of people on earth are metaphysically and particularly disposed to some moral qualities such as being social, communal, altruistic etc., or are these qualities born of specific contexts and driven by specific aims. This seeks to determine what has precedence over the other: the metaphysical or the ethical? Specifically, "Are Africans adherents of ubuntu because there is something African in them that orients them towards ubuntu? Or are they Africans because they are adherents of ubuntu?"[95] Indeed what has precedence over the other, the metaphysical or the ethical?

---

[92]J.-P.SARTRE, *Black Orpheus*, 59.

[93]B.MATOLINO – W.KWINDINGWI, «The End of Ubuntu», 203.

[94]K.WIREDU, *Cultural Universals and Particulars an African Perspective*, 71-72 Also collected in; A.G.MOSLEY, *African Philosophy: Selected Readings*, 400.

[95]B.MATOLINO – W.KWINDINGWI, «The End of Ubuntu», 204.

4. What are the exact political and economic commitments of Ubuntu in the present world order? No one can proudly stand on the ruins of the attempted implementations of communalism in Africa and hope to re-invent the wheel in the current world order.

5. The existence of communitarian thinkers for instance in the Western culture as Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer etc. makes it impossible to continue to presume that communitarianism or communalism is peculiar to the Africans.

Ubuntu and any form of African communalism can therefore neither inaugurate nor sustain a modern African development?

***Rev. Fr. Dr. Felix O. Akamonye**
Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka Nigeria
Email: monye@priest.com